



The Dialectics of Ecological Civilization and Degrowth

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ABSTRACT: This is a critical essay review of John Bellamy Foster's *The Dialectics of Ecology* (2024), a collection of essays which offers an overview of his most recent engagement with eco-Marxism. In *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (2022), Foster has already argued for the necessity of a critique of capitalism as a cornerstone of the Anthropocene epoch, and for an ecological revolution against the destructive exploitation of the ecosystems and the workers. In *The Dialectics of Ecology*, he ventures into two main theoretical and political pathways for the solution of the ecological problem: 1. the rehabilitation of dialectical materialism as the backbone of ecology, and 2. China as the model country of ecological civilization, to be accompanied by planned degrowth in the consumerist Global North. Foster's eco-Marxist positioning is here discussed in light of his previous work and the relevant Marxist debates. The discussion of his recent publication leads to an evaluation of both its merits and limits, in particular relative to 1. the interrelation of dialectics, science and politics, and 2. the question about a viable paradigm of ecological socialism.

KEYWORDS: John Bellamy Foster, dialectics and ecology, eco-Marxism, degrowth, Anthropocene, political ecology, ecological civilization.

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John Bellamy Foster's *The Dialectics of Ecology* is a collection of essays from the *Monthly Review*. They offer an overview of the author's most recent engagement with Marxism and ecology. In *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (2022), Foster has argued for the necessity of a critique of capitalism as a cornerstone of Anthropocene geology and an ecological revolution against capitalist destructive exploitation of the ecosystems and the workers. In *The Dialectics of Ecology* he ventures into two main theoretical and political pathways for the solution of the ecological impasse: 1. The rehabilitation of dialectical materialism as the backbone of (Marxist) ecology, and 2. China as the model country of ecological civilization, to be backed with planned degrowth in the consumerist Global North. In this essay review, I will discuss Foster's eco-Marxist positioning in light of his previous work and relevant Marxist debates. I then delve into his recent publication stressing both its merits and its limits, in particular relative to the two abovementioned issues: the interrelation of dialectics, science and politics, and a viable model of ecological socialism that does not renounce critique.

The Dialectics of Ecology, in the variety of its sections, offers an overview of his most recent reflections on Marxism and ecology, an area in which Foster has become a point of reference. His *Marx's Ecology* (2000) was a fundamental contribution to the reassessment and valuation of Karl Marx's views on the capitalist exploitation of nature. Thanks to Foster, concepts such as the 'metabolic rift'—the destructive contradiction that has increasingly made the economic logic of accumulation clash against the regenerative capacity of nature—has become crucial for ecological critique. It especially brings into focus the problem of the socio-economic structures that are at the origin of the environmental crisis. Twenty years after that important reassessment, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (2020) earned Foster the Deutscher Memorial Prize as "the best and most innovative new writing in or about the Marxist tradition" for his reconstruction of the socialist roots of environmentalism and the relevance of Marxism for the emergence of ecological thought. As an extension of his earlier work, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (2022) signaled Foster's intervention in the debate on the geological impact of humankind by technological means. In that publication, he importantly argued for the necessity of sociopolitical critique as a cornerstone of Anthropocene geology and brought forward the thesis that there is an insurmountable incompatibility between capitalism, on the one hand, and the protection of nature and the preservation of life, on the other. His analysis rested on solid sociological ground,

more than other similar calls for capitalism critique in the Anthropocene, for instance Jason W. Moore's attempt to introduce the alternative neologism of the 'Capitalocene.' Foster's intervention was also marked by the clarity of his style, in a less journalistic manner than others, for instance Naomi Klein's denunciation of the contradiction of environmental agendas with global market economy.¹ In spite of their appreciably different approaches and styles, Foster shares Moore and Klein's conviction that there is a fundamental either-or choice to be taken: "ecological ruin or ecological revolution," as the subtitle of *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* goes. Among others, in that book Foster also offered a sharp analysis of the ecological interdependence between dominant capitalist countries and the Global South. He described the North-South relation as an "unequal ecological exchange." Indeed, owing to economic and geopolitical asymmetries, poorer countries pay the higher price for the ecological crisis they are less responsible of. Moreover, as an editor of the *Monthly Review*, Foster has increased his leftist readers' awareness of the urgency to deal with the ecological problem. At the same time, he made Marx's legacy noticeable again in the broad ecological debates.

The introduction to *The Dialectics of Ecology* points to the difficult relationship between Marxism and the natural sciences, at least in two of its most visible philosophical strands: so-called 'Western Marxism' and the Soviet state doctrine sanctioned by Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938). Foster's understanding of 'Western Marxism' reduces it to a selective reading of György Lukács (only *History and Class Consciousness* in its first edition) and some intellectuals of the Frankfurt School, essentially Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Foster's thesis that Marxism in Western contexts neglected the problem of nature and the sciences owes its plausibility to this very limited understanding of Western Marxism. To be sure, critical theory (especially in Germany) and historical materialism (especially 'cultural Marxism') still have difficulty to include epistemology and ecology as significant components of social and political theory. The separation of the natural sciences and the social sciences, fashioned as an opposition between instrumental reason and value-oriented reason (or communicative action) still affects the heirs of the attack on science and reason of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Yet, for Foster the main problem, a kind of original sin, was the dismissal of Friedrich Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* and the separation of his legacy from Marx's. Even

1. See Moore (2016) and Klein (2014). See also Saito (2024).

though he is correct about the dismissal of Engels, the reasons for the Frankfurt approach to nature and the sciences are more complex. Among the intellectual factors that exerted a strong influence on critical theory one can mention non-Marxist lines of thought such as neo-Kantianism, phenomenology (Edmund Husserl and even Martin Heidegger) and the reaction to positivism, which played a role in the conceptions of science by Adorno, Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. Moreover, Marxist thinkers also embraced different epistemologies than dialectical materialism. It is sufficient to remind us of Bogdanov's post-Machist philosophy in the Soviet Union. The adherence to Marxism of key members of the Vienna Circle, for instance Otto Neurath and Edgar Zilsel, bears witness to the complexity of Marxist epistemologies—not to speak of later developments on both sides of the Iron Curtain. They cannot be reduced to a yes or no answer to Engelsian diamat in its Soviet codification. Most importantly, historical epistemology, as an influential strand of reflection on knowledge and science in continental Europe (especially in France, Germany, and Italy), was first presented by Dominique Lecourt as a complement of historical materialism.

On the other side of the Cold-War divide, according to Foster, a dogmatic outlook and a rigid separation of historical materialism (that is, the dialectics of society) and dialectical materialism prevailed after a promising early phase of Soviet engagement with the philosophical foundations of the social sciences and the natural sciences, in particular biology. Although *Dialectics of Nature* only partially reflects Engels' understanding of science and philosophy, it was canonized in Soviet Union through a dogmatic reception of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909) and Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938). A version of dialectical materialism was thus established, which fostered an objectified understanding of nature, science and history, thereby reasserting positivist scientism in a new form. It paradoxically obliterated crucial aspects of Marx and Engels as well as Lenin's political theory, especially praxis and the open interplay of subjectivity and objectivity.

As Foster remarks, it was a group of British scientists, biologists, sociologists of science and historians of science—Joseph Needham, John D. Bernal, Lancelot Hogben, and Hyman Levy—who brought dialectic thought forward in connection with the sciences. They could pick up and further the theses that the Soviet delegates Nikolai Bukarin, Nikolai Vavilov, Mikhail Zavadovsky and Boris Hessen presented at the Second

International Congress of the History of Science and Technology in London in 1931, before the group was cancelled by Stalin's purges. Moreover, Foster credits Evald Ilyenkov for his integrated social-natural understanding of dialectics in Soviet Union, and Henry Lefebvre for his criticism of the scientism that was implicit in Stalin's ossified understanding of dialectical materialism in France. However, he does not consider important Marxist contributions to epistemology and the history of science, including the early Frankfurt debate on science and epistemology (Franz Borkenau and Henryk Grossmann) or Marcuse's and Habermas's influential vistas on science and ideology. As for Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, it is rapidly dismissed for its epistemological, rather than ontological, understanding of dialectics. Jean Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) is downplayed for similar reasons, namely for restricting the validity of dialectics to the human realm. In such rather schematic view of Marxists' positions on philosophy and science, Louis Althusser's structuralist epistemology and his criticism of ideology do not occupy any place, while Antonio Gramsci's legacy is only hinted at in a critical note on Perry Anderson's anti-scientist cultural Marxism, as presented in *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976). Relative to Lukács, Foster reads *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) against the background of the philosopher's self-criticism in the preface of the 1967 edition and the *Ontology of Social Being* (1973) without any discussion of the political-ideological pressures on the development of his thought before and after 1956.

The heroes of Foster's book are not the philosophers but rather the *dialectical biologists*. He particularly praises Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin for *The Dialectical Biologist* (1985), and Stephen Jay Gould. Their perspectives on the life sciences help Foster to interpret the program of Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* in terms of a theory of emergence and contingency applicable to both nature and social processes (Foster 2024, 38). Indeed, the first three chapters of *The Dialectics of Ecology* are an apology for the dialectics of nature. According to Foster's exegesis (following in the footsteps of earlier estimators of Engels' natural philosophy), the first of the three dialectical laws, "transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa," actually means "phase transition" or "threshold effect"; the second law, the "unity/identity of opposites," ought to be referred to "contradictions and feedback loops that introduce transformative change"; and third, the law of the "negation of the negation" actually is a "historical, evolutionary concept of emer-

gence” (Foster 2024, 52–53). But does Engels’ philosophy of nature really need a translation and be thereby rescued on the basis of the evolution of the biological sciences? And, in turn, do the natural sciences (in particular, biology and ecology) need the dialectics to speak about phase transitions, thresholds, feedback loops, emergence, contingency, evolution and related concepts? Dialectics looks like an imaginary epistemology, which Engelsians can superimpose on scientific results that have been achieved independently of it, as a sort of philosophical superstructure. But no, according to Foster, Engels’ statement, “nature is the proof of dialectics,” still holds and can be actualized as “ecology is the proof of dialectics” (Foster 2024, 86). He also lists the alleged discoveries that biologists made thanks to the dialectics, from E. Ray Lankester’s thesis of a connection between epidemics and farming to J.B.S. Haldane’s theory of the material origins of life drawing on Vladimir Vernadsky’s biosphere, Bernal and Needham’s theories of emergence, and so on (Foster 2024, 56–57). However, even if dialectical materialism might have served in specific contexts as a framework for biology and scientific research in general, one should bear in mind that the history of science has constantly been the theatre of ideological, philosophical and theological confrontation. Isaac Newton grounded the principles of his physics on theological convictions about God’s Providence but this does not imply that one must embrace Christianity as an integral part of modern physics. Following the lesson of Hessen on this, Marxist historiography of science has become aware of the fundamental importance but also of the threats of ideology for science, especially in connection with zeal for orthodoxy (Hessen 2009, 61–73).

According to Foster, a reassessment of the dialectics of nature and society offers a solution to the much-debated ecological (epistemological and ontological) problem of the separation of nature and culture. However, a biology-oriented dialectics risks to dismiss fundamental political and epistemological aspects of dialectical Marxism, in particular the relation between subjectivity and objectivity, which is at the roots of class-struggle. The possibility of a naturalized objectified comprehension of dialectics—which does not solve but rather deepens the separation between the natural sciences and social sciences at a philosophical level—can be evidenced by Foster’s concurring praise of István Mészáros and criticism of Sartre. Foster derives from Mészáros’s *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (1971) the central insight of eco-Marxism that capitalism is responsible for a ‘dual alienation,’ of labor and nature (Foster 2024, 38). Yet, what does this dual alienation mean apart from the use of the same

word in two spheres? While the exploitative and destructive logic of capitalism at the expenses of workers and environments is undeniable, the equivocation between the alienation of humans and environments is untenable from the viewpoint of subjectivity. The reification of human relations based on the reduction of labor to a commodity and the corresponding fetishization of commodities cannot have the same meaning as the destructive exploitation of nature, unless an objectivized dialectic is assumed for both humans and natural processes, thus renouncing the specificity of consciousness and praxis or, even more paradoxically, unless a subjectivation of nature is embraced which equates the latter's *interiority* to human consciousness-cum-praxis.

The Western work that Foster reprimands for its rejection of Engels, Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* addresses this very problem and argues for the necessity of a preliminary clarification of the (epistemological and socio-historical) conditions of validity of dialectics. According to Sartre, dialectics is a subjective-objective conception of historical development that finds its validity in human history and culture, understood in terms of consciousness and praxis. By contrast, an extension of the validity of dialectics so conceived to a reality that is not accessible in terms of subjectivity, namely to nature, is a metaphysical assumption that cannot be critically validated. Sartre's reflection certainly has significant limitations from the viewpoint of contemporary ecological concerns that push towards the integration of history, biology and geology. However, his philosophical critique is still valid. It denounces the μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος, a philosophical equivocation between two very different senses of alienation: the subjugation of an objectified *subjectivity* perceived as a commodity and the destructive exploitation of a living *objective reality* reduced to a commodity. On the one hand, a naturalized dialectics constitutes an ontology that renounces the specificity of historical knowledge and obliterates the political implications of the critique of alienation for emancipatory praxis, which is both material and spiritual. On the other hand, a tentative subjectivation of nature is an undue projection—indeed a form of alienation—akin to the one Feuerbach criticized as the problem of religion (today repeated in many forms, for instance by Gaia's superagency according to Latourian anthropology). One can call it a metaphysical (if not theological) externalization of agency. In this light, the idea of a dual alienation as the political problem of a unified natural-cultural dialectics questions the validity of the principle of emergence itself (the first law of Engels' dialectics of nature) applied to the cultural realm. Are there emergent properties

of the social realm, which cannot be reduced to biological processual objectivity? Foster states that, “at a social level, the dialectic can be seen in terms of human consciousness and practice” (Foster 2024, 49). But he says nothing about the emergent properties of the cultural sphere apart from the prominence that labor and consciousness have in it. What about politics, the arts, ideology? Do they have their specific dynamics? And do they exert feedback loops on the material, biological and economic basis? This is the old question concerning the dependency or relative autonomy of superstructures from the socio-economic base. If this relation is deterministic, Foster’s approach repeats economic reductionism in naturalized guise by grounding it in biology. Moreover, the problem of the dialectics of subjectivity-objectivity raises the question of praxis: While the emancipation of the human condition depends on class struggle, who or what is the subject of nature’s de-alienation? There is no natural counterpart that can substitute the revolutionary subjectivity of antagonistic sociology (that of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*) unless consciousness and praxis are naturalized, that is, they are understood in objectivizing terms (their naturalization) that are more akin to positivistic philosophy than dialectical thought. Ultimately, even if one assumes with Foster that there is a relation between important developments of biological-ecological thought and Marxist dialectics, the linkage between scientific, philosophical and political motivations is far from obvious and would require further investigation.

To be fair, Foster positions himself at the contradictory juncture between two lines of dialectical thought, biological, on the one hand, and humanistic and praxeological, on the other. In spite of some biologist biases, he sometimes resorts to the critical humanistic dialectics. For instance, he draws from it (in chapter three, on Marx’s “revolutionary humanism”) a harsh criticism of Object Oriented Ontology, with particular reference to Timothy Morton’s philosophy. Foster argues that recent object orientations revive the “fetishism of commodities” and constitute “a universalized reification of human social relations” (Foster 2024, 78). They ultimately “reenchant” the world by means of a “remystification.” In accordance to the “flat ontology” that Morton and others embrace, “all beings [...] have agency, even mind” (Foster 2024, 80). Such a philosophical ecology privileges “the mystical, spectral, paranormal” at the costs of meaningful political analysis and emancipatory praxis. This is an instance of Foster’s capacity of ideology criticism which, as I will argue in a moment, should be expanded as a general

intellectual attitude to also debunk ideological shortcomings in the leftist camp. That is, *reflexive* ideology critique is necessary, too.

In my view, the most convincing sections of the book are chapters four and five, on the financialization of nature. Foster here addresses the problem of “natural capital.” According to his reconstruction, this concept stems from socialist concerns about the physical and ecological limits of capitalism in the nineteenth century but has been recently appropriated by (green) capitalism as an instrument of pseudo-ecological commodification of nature. The tendency of pricing nature, promoted by institutions of international governance (e.g. at the UN Climate Change Conference held in Glasgow in 2021), works as a method for the quantification of environmental costs which inexorably leads to the commodification of the so-called ‘ecological services.’ The latter (understood as the natural processes that bear economic advantage) eventually become the object of privatization and investments. The monopolization of the forces of nature—Foster makes the example of a waterfall (Foster 2024, 110)—can be very remunerative for those who can exploit them but is based on several capitalist prejudices, first among them, that private interests can protect the environment better and more effectively than the public sector. This is the prelude to what Foster terms “the tragedy of the commodification of the commons” (Foster 2024, 125; cf. Longo, Clausen and Clark 2015). It is rooted in a vision of natural capital that unduly moves away from considerations about use-value to exchange-value interpretations of nature, according to which physical and biological resources and processes can be equated to commodities which are prone to investments and speculations. Nobel laureate in chemistry Frederick Soddy already remarked, as early as in the first decades of twentieth century, that an irresolvable contradiction exists between physics and money in the understanding of economic growth. While mathematics (as the basis for monetary calculations) posits the accumulation of capital as an infinite process, as if economy were a “self-acting automaton” (Foster 2024, 139), in reality the “free gifts of nature” have physical limitations. Illusions and politics of unlimited competitive expansion pave the way to destruction and war. Today’s market-oriented approaches repeat old errors, for instance policies based on the assumption of nature’s unbounded capacities. Another idea in circulation, with a similar ideological function, is that natural services are subjected to economic ‘fungibility’ wherefore the exhaustion of a resource can always find a functional substitute (Foster 2024, 114, 130). By contrast, Foster argues that nature is mostly non-replaceable, therefore society should

not obliterate the irremediability of many forms of devastations, pollution and extinction for short-sighted economic benefits. As Karl Marx remarked (and Foster reminds us, Foster 2024, 112):

Man is but a tenant of the soil, and he is guilty of crime when he reduces the value for other tenants who are to come after him.

Stepping out of the one-sidedness of economic growth to embrace socialism is the only remedy. This is Foster's argument throughout this and his previous books.

This diagnosis, on which most left leaning ecologists will agree, leads him to bizarre conclusions. Foster firmly believes that China is the embodiment of the socialist solution of the current impasse. Chapters six and seven are a discussion and defense of China's self-fashioning as "the ecological civilization" based on official declarations and some historical-philosophical generalizations without presenting any pondered critical analysis. The concept of "ecological civilization" which, as one reads, originated in Soviet debates of the Eighties, has now become an integral part of official Chinese politics. Foster emphasizes this with several quotations of president Xi Jinping relative to "the new revolutionary, and transformative model" proper to "a great modern socialist society that, unlike capitalism, does not sacrifice people and the planet to profit" on the base of "a non economic definition of well-being" (Foster 2024, 163–164). According to Foster, China's virtuous socialist path to ecology avoids top-down decisions and should be seen as a "grassroots mobilization" towards a "new ecological communism." The key to such "mobilization of the whole society for environmental protection" is planning. Now, while the efficacy of planning vis-à-vis the free market to be lured by incentives, typical of the capitalist Green New Deal, looks plausible, the claim that it has its source in grassroots movements sounds rhetorical and even contradictory, unless the mechanisms of bottom-up planning are illustrated in detail. The connection between official discourses, real politics and economic practices is not addressed in any manner, therefore Foster's repetition of Chinese authorities' official communications looks unsubstantiated. In the same pages, he also celebrates the "new revolutionary subjectivity," the environmental proletariat of the Global South. Although China officially belongs to the "Global South" (according to United Nations designation for Trade and Development, UNCTAD), are its economy and politics representative of the proletarian revolutionary struggles for ecological justice in the Global South? Moreover, Foster delineates a divide that is reminiscent of the Cold War, when real-socialist planned economies faced USA-lead capitalism,

but the interdependent world economy of the globalization of the last thirty years or so does not allow for a clear-cut opposition of incommensurable socio-economic and political systems. Foster is ambivalent on this point, the interdependency of the geopolitical logic—Western capitalism versus Chinese communism—and the economic logic of the globalization—which is at the basis of concepts like “unequal exchange.” Perhaps he assumes that the criticism of the globalization only concerns the West. Furthermore, he does not explain what is so “revolutionary” of twenty-first-century Chinese “praxis.” Is the image of technology-driven China, Chinese productivism and pollution, State-controlled society mere ideological calumny, a distortion orchestrated by anti-socialist capitalist propaganda? Foster’s example for the virtues of grassroots revolutionary socialist planning in contrast to capitalist mismanagement is his comparison between the successful (no irony) mobilization of Chinese society to dam the pandemics of COVID-19 in contrast to the American response. The US American catastrophic and anti-social health politics that led to a mortality rate of 3,507 per million people (as of September 2023) is out of question. But what is Foster’s source of information about the Chinese management of the pandemics independently of State-approved statements. As it seems, Foster applies a double standard of ideology criticism, depending on whether the target is American or Chinese information.

Foster is particularly fond of Marxian ecology with Chinese characteristics. He argues that its materialist (quasi-Epicurean, therefore quasi-Marxist) roots can be found in the Daoist tradition which eased the reception of dialectical materialism in China, according to a simplified history of both dialectics and materialism, not to speak of Chinese history—which Foster means to deduce from Needham’s comparative studies (Foster 2024, 172). In chapter seven, Foster claims that this convergence of Marxism and Chinese philosophy was also consonant with Karl Marx’s criticism of Eurocentrism (Foster 2024, 174). This comes a bit of a surprise, given the amplitude of the Marxist debates on topics such as linear historical development, Oriental despotism and the paradigmatic status that Marx and many Marxists ascribed to English capitalism. Foster sees the criticism of the limits of Marx’s thought concerning Europe and world history as an interpretative mistake by Western Marxism “as a distinct philosophical tradition [which] has been ambivalent with respect to imperialism and deeply ethnocentric in its approach to Marxism in the West” (Foster 2024, 177). Such exaggerations do not need to be discussed. Let me only add that, in opposition to the

dead end of Western-Marxist and imperialist Eurocentrism, Foster resorts to President Xi Jinping's vision about the Marxist and Chinese roots of the ecological civilization to come, by quoting from the latter's *The Governance of China* and making reference to his Report at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017 (Foster 2024, 184; cf. 326, n. 41 and 42). He concludes with Needham's words:

China has in her time learned much from the rest of the world; now perhaps it is time for the nations and the continents to learn again from her. (Foster 2024, 184)

That there is much to learn from China is out of doubt but, given this context, the question is: what is the lesson to be derived today? Learning implies broad programs of cultural and scientific exchanges as well as in-depth investigations of historical and cultural interdependencies like those Needham accomplished through his *Science and Civilization in China* and his commitment to the UNESCO peace-oriented multilateral diplomacy on matters of education, science and culture.

Chapter eight is an interlude on Anthropocene extractivism. It deals with the Great Acceleration of the curves representative of the planetary crisis due to anthropic trends. Foster makes the suggestive proposal to conceive of them as an instance of the dialectical law of qualitative leap caused by quantitative processes. In this case, the human relation to the planet is concerned. That extractive activities are a key problem, should be clear to everybody. Indeed, they are the fossil preconditions of today's capitalism. Foster criticizes the many metaphoric uses of the expression 'extractivism' today—financial, cultural, epistemological and other extractivisms (Foster 2024, 189). He favors the original Marxist meaning strictly connected with mining and, to lesser extent, agriculture (Foster 2024, 189–190) as a more literal use allows us to, first, understand the material roots of the ecological problem and, second, to strengthen the standpoint of the Global South relative to the problem of capitalism and ecology, that is, the standpoint of people in areas that are subject to massive expropriation of their resources with massive environmental impact.

The last two chapters of the volume deal with the second pillar of Foster's ecological transition: alongside the plan of an ecological civilization—to be learned from the East—the program of economic degrowth—for the West. Chapter Nine, "Socialism and Ecological Survival" addresses the shift of environmental policies, in line with the IPCC, from mitigation to adaptation, based on the fact that even the best scenario of climate change implies the massive alteration of the

conditions of life on the Earth. Foster substitutes the rather passive concept of adaptation for the more active one of survival. He retakes eco-socialist and technology-critique positionings by socialists of the Seventies (especially Barry Commoner, Charles H. Anderson and Rudolf Bahro) to argue that ecology and peace have become (or must become) of uttermost concern to the working class in the atomic age. Indeed, the atomic bomb has introduced a new apocalyptic dimension to politics as a symbolic and real threat of extermination. The end of humanity could follow a nuclear war or the crossing of the planetary boundaries of human habitability (Foster 2024, 207). The connection between the two threats is not arbitrary—remember that the Anthropocene Working Group that worked towards the validation of the Anthropocene hypothesis for about two decades (2009–2023) designated radioactive traces of atomic tests as the main molecular marker of a new geological epoch.

In chapter ten, Foster expounds on the idea of a state-directed planning towards sustainable and fair societies. This means degrowth “for the most opulent sectors of the world population” (Foster 2024, 239). The premise is that GDP cannot be the primary measure of progress and wellbeing, since “economic growth [...] is the main cause of the destruction of the Earth as a safe place for humanity” (Foster 2024, 241). Capitalism generates illusions that are functional to the very dangerous maintenance of the unbalanced status quo, for instance the myth of technofixes (Foster 2024, 242–243) and that of self-regulating markets (Foster 2024, 244). By contrast, planned and semi-planned economies, China, Cuba and Venezuela give Foster “hope of ecological breakthroughs” (Foster 2024, 266–267). His Manichean opposition—a revival of the spirit of Cold-War party politics that does not shed much light on global interdependencies and ubiquitous technocratic responses to the ecological challenges—is accompanied by interesting reflections on the efficacy and limitations of central planning in the USSR. Foster points to Lenin’s New Economy Policy of 1921 as a measure that introduced a form of mixed economy, a “State Capitalism” in which the State became allied with monopoly capitalism (only big capital) under socialist control as a necessary step in the transition to socialism (Foster 2024, 253). The successes of the initial phase of the NEP, according to Foster, were shaded by Stalin’s 1928 brutal acceleration of the planning towards industrialization via top-down decisions. Despite its limitations, this change of pace allowed Soviet Union to rapidly develop an industrial economy capable of resisting and eventually defeating Nazi Germany (Foster 2024, 256–257). The problems with excessive State control and

bureaucracy—as the story goes—became more evident during the Cold War but only came to a real halt in “the chaos of Gorbachev era” which, according to Foster, was merely concerned with the concession of “amenities to the people.” It eventually led to the collapse of the system and the seizure of power by an oligarchy eager to imitate the opulent lifestyle of the Western elites (Foster 2024, 258). China’s developments were different: it soon abandoned the Soviet form of planning (after a first phase, from 1953 to 1978). After 1978, China became a mixed economy similar to Lenin’s NEP, which Samir Amin called “State capitalism under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party” (Foster 2024, 260). According to Foster, this hybrid offers a model of state regulation and co-production between state and market, in which the latter is never left alone (Foster 2024, 261). To prove the efficacy of planning, Foster even mentions cases of US American history in which the State adopted forms of planning. This happened for instance during the WWII. The clearest example of planning successes in the United States is (quite unexpectedly!) the Manhattan project (Foster 2024, 262–263), which also marked the beginning of the atomic age that Foster, in other parts of the book (aforementioned), presents as a qualitative leap into a new age of existential threat for humanity.

Thus, Foster’s *The Dialectics of Ecology* certainly confronts the reader with very contradictory theses: a call for eco-socialism as the only alternative to the destruction of the planet that capitalism has no antidote against, and the indication of Chinese ‘State capitalism’ as the best model for a transition to a communist ecological civilization; the call for a new paradigm capable of bringing together philosophical reflexivity, social and cultural progress through bottom-up politics, and the attempt to make it fit into a revised version of Engels’ dialectics of nature with bias towards biologism; the criticism of capitalist propaganda, including on ecological policies, without bearing to fruition the criticism of ideology—one of the most important contribution of Western Marxists to leftist political praxis—as a more general instrument for the debunking of the various (economic and political) agendas behind dominant discourses, in the West as well as in the East. The engagement for the construction of shared cultural and scientific grounds for humanity, in the follow of Joseph Needham’s magisterial work, is difficult but also rewarding. To be sure, the construction of a ‘civilization’ is a more complex issue than a political program, no matter how virtuous the intentions are. Foster’s most important message comes when, leaving aside the apologetic and oppositional tone, he looks at the ideals that motivate his

engagement with ecology and justice in the first place and inspire visions of alternative futures: “In an ecosocialist society, where accumulation of capital is not the primary objective, it would often be those labour-intensive areas in the caring professions, education, the arts, and organic relations to the earth that would be considered most important and built into social planning” (Foster 2024, 271).

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Biography

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