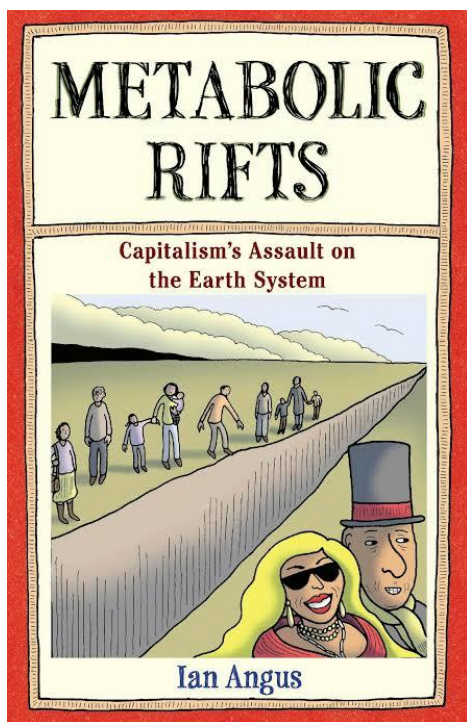


BOOK REVIEW

Severed Universal Metabolism and Predatory Logic: Groundwork for an Ecosocialist Critique of Capitalism

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Ian Angus. 2026. *Metabolic Rifts: Capitalism's Assault on the Earth System*. Monthly Review Press. 248. ISBN: 978-1685901622.



In her critical examination of positivism and constructivism in the philosophy and history of science, philosopher Helena Sheehan argues that the Marxist intellectual tradition has the strongest claim to the sociohistorical and interdisciplinary character of science (Sheehan 2018). Ian Angus' book, *Metabolic Rifts: Capitalism's Assault on the Earth System*, advances the aforementioned interdisciplinary approach to knowledge, transcending parochial positivist and constructivist epistemologies. In addition, the book adopts a realist yet non-reductionist approach to problems afflicting humanity. Angus treats capitalism as an autoimmune condition that

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attacks the Earth system on which it survives.

Until a few decades ago, both Marxists and non-Marxists generally believed that Marxism had very little to contribute to ecology, and that Karl Marx was not deeply concerned about nature or capitalism's assault on the ecosystem. This changed with the seminal work of sociologist John Bellamy Foster, who introduced the concept of "metabolic rift" in his work, *Marx's Ecology* (Foster 2000). Angus builds on the same discourse, apropos of natural science, Marxism, and ecology. By integrating science, philosophy, and political economy to understand the complex reality of capitalism's assault on ecology, Angus situates his work in the Marxist tradition of integrated knowledge.

The book is divided into four parts and has sixteen chapters. The first section presents a detailed account of the discovery and rediscovery of the "metabolic rift" and the eco-socialist tradition. Angus then explores the neglected traditions of key Marxist figures who engaged with science to understand history and the world. According to Angus, although Marx's "metabolic" approach was neglected due to the overt productivism/accelerationism of Marxist thinkers, it survived in the important works of three Marxists: Ferdinand Bebel, Karl Kautsky and Nikolai Bukharin. Angus demonstrates how they individually approached social and scientific questions, similar to the way Marx did.

Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question* was praised by Vladimir Lenin as an important work for its deep insights into agriculture and economics (Kautsky 1988). Angus also discusses Bebel's 1879 book, *Woman and Socialism*, which explored ecological issues. Bebel wrote that capitalist agriculture is "soil vandalism" that "cripples the land and decreases the crops". He also bemoaned environmental destruction as "the senseless ravaging of forests, for the sake of profit" (31). Angus elucidates that these works disprove the canard that socialists of the late 1800s and early 1900s did not know or care about the universal metabolism of nature or the ecological catastrophe that is the capitalist onslaught on the universal metabolism.

The second part of the book describes the concept of "organic metabolism" as conceptualized by agricultural chemist, Justus Von Liebig, and the Communist doctor, Roland Daniels. Marx used this concept to understand the loss of soil fertility and the concurrent rupture between humanity and the Earth, caused by the shipping of nutrients away from the countryside to industrial towns (Foster 1999). Beginning with the primitive accumulation of capital, the process has caused an irreparable breakdown of the organic bond between nature and society.

The bulk of the book is an attempt to explain the core concepts of ecological Marxism and political ecology by detailing the metabolic processes vital to Earth's systems. In Chapter 10, Angus discusses the carbon cycle's breakdown—which is driving climate change—and in Chapter 11, he describes how industrial agriculture is pumping nitrogen into Earth's systems faster than any natural process through fertilizers, disrupting the nitrogen cycle. Angus proposes a radical reduction in the use of nitrogen and chemical fertilizers as a solution to environmental damage, and envisions a time when it will be possible to feed people without them.

These chapters are the strength of Angus' book. They demonstrate how Marxists should use science to understand the complexity of the damage inflicted by capitalism on the Earth's systems and develop viable solutions based on the idea of hope without optimism, i.e., confronting adversity rather than denying it, as promulgated by Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton (2015). This is explored more prominently in the final chapter of the book, "A Fight for Survival", which explores how scientists often come close to recognizing that the environmental crises we face are systemic ones, but seldom draw radical conclusions that require structural changes. This chapter also demonstrates that although science tells us that we need to take urgent measures, real and substantial change requires a long-term, cooperative approach between scientists, activists, and workers. Angus emphasizes that the reordering of capitalism through investing in green energy is nothing but a smokescreen, obscuring its systemic logic of appropriating nature and labour. He reminds us of the importance of living in tune with the natural world.

One can argue that Angus' work does not delve deeply enough into some important contemporary debates, such as the one between Communist Kohei Saito's "degrowth communism", which draws on Marx's unpublished notebooks, and the left-wing accelerationists and productivists who argue for overpowering nature (Saito, 2023). This can be considered a limitation of the book.

In *Metabolic Rifts*, Angus provides us with great insights into the strong association between revolutionary politics and scientific research, demonstrating how the Marxist idea of an interrelated and emergent knowledge framework is vital to developing real solutions to the climate crisis. This crisis is no longer imminent but is unfolding here and now. It requires not only investment in green energy, but also movements that consider questions of ecology, politics, and economy as interlinked—movements that radically reject the capitalist system's predatory approach to Earth, nature, and human labour. The book will certainly interest

scholars, experts, and lay readers interested in the intersection of progressive politics, ecology, economy, and technology.

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