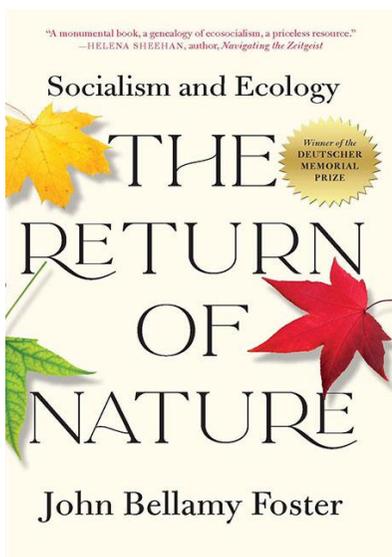


BOOK REVIEW

Ecology and Socialism to Ecosocialism: Roots and Branches

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John Bellamy Foster. 2020. *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology*. New York, Monthly Review Press. ISBN 978-158367-836-7 (cloth); pp. 687; \$35 (HB), ₹3,447 (HB).



Sustainable development discourse attempts to manage trade-offs between the triad of the social (poverty and equity), ecological (natural resources), and economic (growth) (Munasinghe 1993). In contrast, ecosocialism discourse sets up a dialogue between social equity and ecological sustainability. In *The Return of Nature*, leading Marxist scholar on environmental politics John Bellamy Foster traces the deep intellectual roots that have shaped the ecosocialism project. In elegantly outlining the challenge, the author captures an interesting discursive turn, which is that.

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the old notion of the “conquest of nature” is being replaced by a radical conception of the need to restore the human social metabolism with nature while promoting genuine human equality. Although revolutionary in its challenge to capitalism, this conception is not new, rather it is traceable to the long struggle for socialism and ecology beginning in the nineteenth century. (p. 7)

The Return of Nature will especially interest those who are keen to understand the intellectual journeys of “numerous socialists and radical materialists” (p. 12), including those in the natural sciences, such as “Fabian-style socialist ecologist” Arthur Tansley (p. 8); “red scientists” JD Bernal, JBS Haldane, Joseph Needham, and Hyman Levy (p. 8); “left Darwinian” E Ray Lankester (p. 7); and “radical humanist” Lancelot Hogben (p. 334).

The common thread that runs through the book is the focus on how these socialist thinkers explored the “dialectical interpenetration of nature and society, and the complex relations of evolution and emergence” (p. 8). As Foster points out, their varied ideas and imaginations could be boiled down to arguments for a strong version of dialectical naturalism, a framework that was arguably a precursor to today’s notions of systems ecology and earth system analysis.

Part I comprises four chapters, in which ideas are traced directly to the oeuvre of Karl Marx. The first chapter explores the writings of E Ray Lankester—a protégé of Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin—who coined the term bionomics while carrying out an ecological analysis that went on to influence British science. Chapter 2 looks at the works of artist, craftsman, and poet William Morris, who was greatly inspired by the English Romantic movement. We are reminded here that the “estrangement of art and labor” (p. 76) and “alienation of nature” (p. 76) are dominant themes in Morris’ work. Morris was closely associated with the working-class movement as “designer, artisan, and manufacturer” (p. 105). He remains in focus in the third and fourth chapters as well, but as leader of the Socialist League, which was made up of different shades of socialists, Marxists, and even anarchists. Of note is Foster’s insight on Morris’ many efforts towards assembling revolutionary possibilities for creating a “socialist/communist society” (p. 150) that could resolve a chain of tensions between “town and country (the ecological problem), work and art (social labor), and men and women (gender relations)” (p. 150).

Part II is composed of three chapters that discuss Friedrich Engels’ ideas on the environment and health conditions of the working class. This sets the stage for elaborating on his ecological worldview, which underlined “the intrinsic value of nature and hence the tragedy of its estrangement under

capitalism” (p. 179). In the fifth and sixth chapters, Foster takes the reader on a fascinating journey that recounts Engels’ numerous studies on the environmental conditions of the working class that helped him to substantiate his theoretical understanding of what he terms the dialectics of nature. In contrast, the seventh chapter focuses on Engels’ more scientific deliberations on the probable role that labour might have played in effecting the transition from ape to man. Through a study of Engels, Foster draws several telling comparisons with Marx’s political economic works.

Part III takes up ideas and works that help to elaborate on Engels’ ecological insights. With Arthur Tansley as chief protagonist, Foster traces the roots of ecosystem analysis in the eighth chapter. This part is an ecologist’s delight. It gives us a close-up view of the debates on “materialism versus idealism” (p. 322) and pedagogic matters in the teaching of ecology. Chapter 9 traces the influence of critical ideas contained in the *Science at the Cross Roads*, a collection of papers by Nikolai Bukharin, AF Joffe, I Vavilov, and Boris Hessen on Bernal, Haldane, and Needham, the “red scientists” in Britain. Foster describes the volume as “an extraordinarily audacious set of investigations into the complexity and dynamism of natural processes—along with the developing rifts in the human relation to nature” (p. 372).

Chapter 11, aptly titled “A Science for the People”, and the epilogue follow a ground-up approach in dissecting movements that were “new forms of struggle devoted to anti-racism, anti-imperialism, peace, and the promotion of a global human ecology” (p. 457). Here, the author offers a brief history of structures and struggles within a vast array of organizations in this realm, such as Society for Freedom in Science; Committee for Cultural Freedom; Committee for Nuclear Information; Committee for Environmental Information; and Committee for Nuclear Disarmament— on either side of the Atlantic in Britain and in the US. As expected, the focus is on the “environmentalism” of the Global North; it primarily looks at matters related to pollution rather than struggles associated with access to resources of natural origin that lead to environmental distribution conflicts in the Global South, lucidly captured in Gadgil and Guha (1995).

In broad methodological terms, Foster suggests that the book essentially weaves art and science and orients the reader towards a more genealogical style of exploring causes. Despite these striking analyses of the current environmental predicament, the notion of “sustainable human development” is given too little attention and wants for rigorous conceptual treatment.

Finally, some words on presentation. The copyediting could have been more meticulous. For example, the fact of E Ray Lankester was president of the Marine Biological Association was repeated on pages 58 and 303; in one, the association's year of establishment is mentioned as 1884 while it is 1883 in the other. Similarly, the information that Ernst Haeckel introduced the term ecology in 1866 is repeated on pages 13 and 305. In other words, there is a rushed feel to the production of the book, which somewhat diminishes the value of an otherwise commendable effort. Foster's earlier works have been inspiring and compelling for their insights and the fact that he places writings on socialism and of Karl Marx within the larger field of ecological politics. *The Return of Nature*, however, does not always live up to its promise.

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