The House That Marx Built

Benjamin Kunkel

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The classical and continuing aim of Marxism, you might say, is to coordinate a complete theory of social evolution with a comprehensive politics of revolution: a very tall order. And precisely this systematic or totalizing character of Marxism has imposed a certain fragmentary quality on all political or intellectual activity carried out in its spirit. The impossibility of any single mind, or for that matter any pair of minds, achieving the total perspective required is obvious, and the program first drafted by Marx and Engels—at once a political program and a research program—was bound to remain incomplete, even in outline, during their lifetimes.

Some of the enduring incompleteness of the Marxist project, across later generations, is historical and regrettable. Since the demise of the Second International, the drift has been toward the mutual estrangement of intellectuals and activists, and intellectuals among themselves have tended to put on the blinders of their separate academic disciplines, forgetting that the borders within the social sciences and the divisions between those sciences and such realities as “nature” and “culture” are only features of maps of the world and not of its unbroken terrain. Activists, for their part, are liable to forget that ideas constitute a material force in history. But there is another and better cause of the incomplete or fragmentary state of Marxism, which is simply its special openness as a way of thinking to the whole of human and indeed nonhuman life; its broken-off, frustrated, and even incoherent character is, in this sense, merely the sign of its ongoing life. It remains unfinished because so does history.

In recent years, Marxism has shown itself to be a living proposition particularly through the opening up of two lines of investigation that were, in the work of Marx and Engels and in that of most of their heirs, detectable but undeveloped.

The first of these lines of investigation resumes the elaboration of a Marxist ecology, to modify the title of an important book by John Bellamy...
Foster. Marx’s *Ecology* (2000) demonstrated that Marx and Engels were genuinely ecological thinkers, aware that the productive activity of human beings, based on whatever form of social relations, is also a way of managing or mismanaging the metabolic exchange between our uniquely political species and other kinds of terrestrial nature. Marx was notably concerned with the matter of soil exhaustion. The capitalism of his time starved the soil of vital nutrients, first by concentrating the population in great cities where human waste no longer fertilized the earth but instead polluted streets and waterways, and, second, by encouraging mono-cropping through the com-modification of agriculture. On this basis, Bellamy Foster derives a general concept of the *metabolic rift* between capitalist humanity and nonhuman nature. Though he doesn’t say so, there exists an obvious analogy between the tendency of capitalism to take from human laborers more than it returns in wages, and to take from nonhuman nature more than it replenishes in usable energy and biological life.

The green turn in Marxism advances old insights: capitalism, we read in *Capital*, undermines not just one but both of the “original sources of all wealth—the laborer and the soil.” Ecosocialist thought can nevertheless be criticized for not having gone far enough. Thinkers like Bellamy Foster, James O’Connor, and Paul Burkett in *Marxism and Ecological Economics* (2007) have so far mainly established the compatibility of Marxism with ecology. This is no small thing, given Marxism’s association, in theory, with the heedless development of “all the productive forces” available to any mode of production, and, in practice, with the disgraceful environmental record of the Soviet Union. But due integration of Marxist ecology and economics, in empirical and analytic terms as well as abstract and axiomatic ones, doesn’t seem to have taken place yet. Jason W. Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life* promises to do something to redress this failure.

Alongside the new Marxist ecology has also sprung up what might be called a Marxist oikology. *Oikos*, Greek for household, is the root shared by the words *ecology* and *economics*: ecology (from *oikos* plus *logos*, for discourse) literally means the study of a household, while economy (*oikos* plus *nomia*) means the management of one. Ecology refers, then, to studying the planetary household of the natural world; “the economy” refers to managing the—currently capitalist—household of formal commodity exchange; and oikology would have to do with the household or reproductive activities of human beings wherever these take place by means other than commodity exchange, that is, without money.

Oikological phenomena would thus encompass uncompensated household cleaning, repairs, and food preparation; uncompensated care for children, the sick, and the elderly (rather than the paid work of professional teachers and nurses); uncompensated counseling (by friends and family
rather than psychiatrists), uncompensated sex (with volunteering lovers rather than sex workers), and so on. Because the burden of such unwaged labor has fallen disproportionately on women since the advent of capitalism and before, feminists have drawn special attention to the oikological arena. Silvia Federici’s “Wages Against Housework” (1975), a landmark of Marxist feminism, emphasized the indispensable role of unwaged and typically female labor in sustaining the household of the—at the time—typically male wage-laborer. More recently, Nancy Fraser’s 2014 essay in New Left Review, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” called “for an expanded conception of capitalism” that fully acknowledges the non-economic conditions essential to the maintenance of the capitalist economy. These include both “the natural processes that sustain life and provide the material inputs for social provisioning,” and the “solidary relations” and “affective dispositions” that furnish “the appropriately socialized and skilled human beings who constitute ‘labor.’”

Marxism intuited something like this interdependency from the outset, as it fumbled toward the ungraspable object of totality, or “the evolution of society as a whole,” as Lukács put it. If it hasn’t yet taken the full measure of this intuition, it has started to look with sharper eyes at the eco-totality—simultaneously ecological, economic, and oikological—that was always in view. That alone is enough to distinguish it from all those varieties of scholarship, journalism, opinion, and ideology that are more congenial to capital, and to guarantee the pertinence of the tradition to any future worth pursuing. It would be facile to say, in a breath, that an enlarged theory should now unite with a renewed praxis, “proclaiming”—Lukács again—“the relation between the tasks of the immediate present and the totality of the historical process.” Still, at least two political results seem worth hoping for. One is an expanded constituency for socialism, or whatever you want to call it: not just more feminists and greens but more people—surely the majority—alive to the interrelationship between economic distress, ecological anxiety, and household or community frustration and neglect. A second and related result might be a better understanding of the vulnerabilities of a planetary capitalism that can appear omnipotent. After all, the same global economy that dominates the ecological and oikological spheres of life also helplessly depends upon those spheres for its continued expansion. It survives at the mercy not only of workers but of unwaged human life and nonhuman nature, should they turn uncooperative.

Benjamin Kunkel is the author, most recently, of Utopia or Bust (Verso, 2014), an essay collection, and Buzz, a play on ecological themes.