

# Approaches to Environment

## ECOFEMINISM

NPTOL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjao Kipgen  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

# Ecofeminism

- ▶ Ecofeminism was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974.
- ▶ Ecofeminism, also called 'ecological feminism', branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature.
- ▶ Ecofeminism is an academic and activist movement that sees the domination of the environment as being interconnected with the oppression of women.
- ▶ The movement emerged in the mid-1970s, alongside the green movement and second wave feminism.

- Some early ecofeminist writers celebrated the identification of women with nature as an ontological reality (Daly 1978; Griffin 1978; Shiva 1988).
- Seeking to upend the negative association of women with nature, they speciously accepted the biologizing of the personality traits that patriarchal society assigns to women, claiming these connections to be positive with such constructs as Shiva's "feminine principle" (Shiva 1988; Biehl 1991).
- Ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify the dominance of women and nature through the use of dualistic and hierarchical categories such as heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, culture/nature, white/non-white, spirit/matter. Basically, ecofeminist believe that the current global crises are the result of the mutually reinforcing ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, naturism and speciesism.

- ▶ Ecofeminism first emerged in response to the nature–culture dualism embedded in the philosophy of Western rationality.
- ▶ Ecofeminism is a philosophy of critical analysis in which it is argued there is a link between women and nature, and that patriarchy manifests in harmful, unethical and degrading environmental practices, e.g., land resources are only associated with profitability.
- ▶ Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature.
- ▶ And it contends that these two forms of domination are interconnected (Mellor 1997).

- Ecofeminism, part and parcel of radical ecology, addresses possibilities for changing the hegemonic patriarchal paradigm whereby nature and women are conflated and delegitimated as inferior, passive, and non-productive categories, by means of domination and exploitation (Mirna, 2000)

# Theoretical Backgrounds: Ecofeminism

- ▶ Merchant (1980; 2003), Salleh (1984), Mies (1986), Shiva (1988; 2001), Mies and Shiva (1993), and Mellor (1997) shows the diverse range of historical analyses of the connections between gender and environment.

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjahaonngden  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

# Carolyn Merchant

- ▶ Merchant (1980) is one of the earliest ecofeminist thinkers to investigate the historical lineage of the women-nature linkage.
- ▶ She contends that pre-16th-century societies in the West were built around integrated and closely knit social ties based on an embodied connection between nature and humans.
- ▶ The imagery of nature became presented as wild and uncontrollable, something that needed to be “tamed” and “controlled” by scientific progress. [This, in turn, contributed to a mechanistic worldview and created a disjuncture in the nature-society connection]
- ▶ In her more recent work, Merchant recommends an alternative to the post-Edenic (scientific) determination to dominate nature, and suggests an “environmental ethic based on a partnership between humans and the nonhuman world” (Merchant 2003, 8).

# Vandana Shiva

- ▶ Vandana Shiva attempts to explore the historical origins of modern “reductionist science” (Shiva 1988).
- ▶ Shiva draws linkages between western scientific control of natural resources and the history of British colonialism in India and argues that traditional agriculture in India had been a sustainable one and functioned in harmony with nature until it was destroyed by the violence of scientific agriculture and forestry of patriarchal Western society.
- ▶ For Shiva, the violation of indigenous knowledge systems in the name of the western form of development has contributed to a disjuncture between women and environment.



# Maria Mies

- ▶ Maria Mies (1986) uses a Marxist–feminist perspective to argue that capitalist patriarchy has colonized women's bodies and labor by alienating women from their immediate biophysical environment.
- ▶ Alienation is a central concern of historical perspectives in ecofeminism.
- ▶ For her, women and environment are exploited for the creation and sustenance of patriarchal domination, which in turn produces the necessary ideological superstructure for the alienation of women from nature.

# Ariel Salleh

- ▶ Ariel Salleh (1984) also draws on Marxist theory, suggesting that alienation from nature cannot be comprehended in isolation from the sexist nature of this alienation.
- ▶ Salleh argues that the common separation, both in theory and in practice, of productive and reproductive labor is part and parcel of these joint commodifications.
- ▶ Salleh further postulates that the assumption of biological egalitarianism in most environmentalism fails to account for what she describes as the deep connection between the commodification of nature and commodification of women.

# Mary Mellor

- ▶ Mellor (1997) presents what she calls “a realist and a materialist connection” between feminism and ecology.
- ▶ According to her, even though both men and women share a dialectical relationship with the environment, their interactive experiences are materially unequal. Moreover, since women are culturally understood to have a more intimate knowledge of nature, they “can be seen as playing a socially constructed mediating role between hu(man)ity and non-human nature” (Mellor 1997, 13).
- ▶ Thus for Mellor, ecofeminism should study the structures of mediation (not particular social contexts) that have contributed to these forms of domination.

## Cont.

- ▶ Mary Mellor argues that ecofeminism has a major contribution to make to understanding the current destructive relationship between humanity and nonhuman nature.
- ▶ Ecofeminist political economy sees the externalisation and exploitation of women and nature as linked. For women, their marginalisation from what is identified as 'the economy' is not accidental. While women are present in the economy in large numbers as consumers and employees, their lives as women is excluded.

# Conceptualizing nature–gender relations

- ▶ First, historical ecofeminism presents a systematically developed historical analysis of how human–nature relations evolved over time and ways in which scientific enlightenment discourse shaped the dialectics.
- ▶ Second, these scholars underscore the politics of science—that science is not a mere objectivity, but rather is embedded in power relations.
- ▶ Finally, this position also explores ways in which the Marxist notion of alienation helps in conceptualizing the commodification of gender relations.

# Spiritualization of the Women–Nature Relationship

- ▶ Some scholars explore the spiritual and religious interconnections in ecofeminist thinking.
- ▶ Such writers have often promoted the mystification and romanticization of nature and the traditions of indigenous peoples, conceptually associating these traditions with nature and the natural.
- ▶ The spiritualist tradition in ecofeminism is also commonly associated with Wicca and neo-paganism, and typically emphasizes the earth-based symbolism associated with goddess worship.

# Starhawk

- ▶ Starhawk sums up the central philosophical argument of this brand of ecofeminism when she points out that “to say that ecofeminism is a spiritual movement, in an earth-rooted sense, means that it encompasses a dimension that profoundly challenges our ordinary sense of value, that counters the root stories of our culture and attempts to shift them” (Starhawk 1989, 174–189).
- ▶ Thus in Starhawk’s view, ecofeminism is not new but rather has its origin in the prepatriarchal biocentric religious perspective she and other writers associate with ancient peoples.

# Charlene Spretnak

- ▶ According to Charlene Spretnak, the most intriguing thing about ecofeminism is its awareness about the relationship between women (as goddesses) and animals, plants, and nature at large (Spretnak 1990).
- ▶ Ecofeminism from this perspective finds an underlying mystical communion between women and nature that connects women's bodies with the cosmic world.
- ▶ For Spretnak, the worship of the Goddess involves a cognitive shift from the atomistic self-interested self of humans to an ecological “natural” self.



# 1980s

## Two schools of thought: radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism.

- ▶ Radical ecofeminists contend that the dominant patriarchal society equates nature and women in order to degrade both.
- ▶ Cultural ecofeminists, on the other hand, encourage an association between women and the environment. They contend that women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles (e.g., family nurturer and provider of food) and their biology (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation).

# Eco-Feminism – Maldevelopment

- ▶ Vandana Shiva argues that economic development is a form of “maldevelopment”, due to the reduction of both women and nature into passive objects who are simply subject to technological and economic forces.

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjiahao Kipgen  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

## Eco-Feminism – The Sacred Feminine

- ▶ “Some call it the female principle, inhabiting and permeating all things—this spirituality is understood in a less ‘spiritual’, that is, idealistic way. Although the spirit was female, it was not apart from the material world, but seen as the life-force in everything and in every human being: it was indeed the connecting principle.” (Mies & Shiva 1993, p. 17)

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjao Kipchan  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

# Eco-feminism – Essentialism Critique

- The charges against ecofeminists as essentialist, ethnocentric and intellectual goddess worshippers who mistakenly portray the Earth as female or issue totalizing and ahistorical mandates for worldwide veganism—these sweeping generalizations...have been disproven again and again..., yet the contamination lingers.” (Gaard 2011, p. 32)

# Eco-Feminism – (Wo)Men and Nature

- After the charges of gender essentialism... most feminists working on the intersections of feminism and the environment thought it better to rename their approach to distinguish it from essentialist feminisms and thereby gain a wider audience; hence the proliferation of terms....” (Gaard 2011, p. 27)

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjaha Mingeni  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

# Ecological Perspectives

- ▶ Ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology.
- ▶ Ecofeminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment, and argues that there is a connection between women and nature.

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Narmada Krippl  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

- ▶ Ecofeminists believe that this connection is illustrated through the traditionally 'female' values of reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature.
- ▶ Additionally, ecofeminists draw connections between menstruation and moon cycles, childbirth and creation etc.
- ▶ Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society

# Ecogender Studies

- ▶ Ecogender studies draws on both feminist political ecology and the social scientific version of ecofeminism.
- ▶ It is only by eliminating domination as such—both in an ideological and a material sense—that women and men will be able to fulfill themselves completely both as gendered as well as human beings, which in turn will promote the freedom of nonhuman nature.
- ▶ Ecogender studies attempts to theorize this vision by emphasizing relationality in both human–human and human–environmental interactions.



## Cont.

- ▶ That gender oppression and the oppression of the nonhuman are interconnected in an embodied and relational fashion that has both ideological and material foundations.
- ▶ That gender is itself a relational construction, and that therefore women's and men's embodied environmental experience cannot be understood in isolation.
- ▶ That this embodied connection is not only gendered but is historically situated and socially complex.
- ▶ That by acknowledging the complexity of interactions between gender and environment, ecogender studies acknowledges interactions as shaped and constrained by other patterns of oppression, such as those along racial, ethnic, class, caste, and other lines.

## Cont.

- ▶ Ecogender studies does not claim that women are essentially closer to nature, rather, it is not possible to understand the ecologically destructive consequences of dominant trends in human development without understanding, inter alia, their gendered character.
- ▶ Ecogender studies, then, explores the dialogic character of the relationality of gender, society, and environment—which unavoidably leads to a focus on the patterns of oppression that constrain these interactions.

# Structures of Domination & Domination of Nature

- ▶ Ecofeminists and ecological feminist philosophers (e.g., Griffin 1978; Merchant 1980, 1990; Plumwood 1986,) have argued that, ultimately, historical and causal links between the dominations of women and of nature are located in conceptual structures of domination and in the way women and nature have been conceptualized, particularly in the western intellectual tradition.
- ▶ Twin dominations of women and nature in value dualisms, i.e., disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than as complementary) and exclusive (rather than as inclusive), and value hierarchies

## Cont.

- ▶ One role of feminism and environmental ethics, then, is to expose and dismantle these dualisms and to rethink and reconceive those mainstay philosophical notions (e.g., reason, rationality, knowledge, objectivity, the self as knower and moral agent) which rely on them.
- ▶ Oppressive patriarchal conceptual frameworks—ones undergirding all social “isms of domination,” e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism as well as “naturism,” or the unjustified domination of nonhuman nature (see Warren 1987, 1988, 1990).

## Cont.

- ▶ Critiques, based on the domination of nature, go beyond the mere condemnation of the ecological crisis to reveal a connection between the domination of nonhuman nature, social domination, and psychological domination.
- ▶ They argue that as nature comes to be viewed as nothing more than the material for human domination, we develop an anthropocentric view in which we see ourselves as "the measure of all things".
- ▶ Nature becomes an external Other, merely the "stuff of domination".

## Cont.

- ▶ Marx's critique of capitalist exploitation is renewed and extended in a critique of the domination of nature that attempts to uncover the psychic and social basis of the solidification of repressive society.
- ▶ The domination of nature is shown to entail social and psychic consequences that result in ecological crises, patriarchal domination, and repressive political forms in both capitalist and socialist societies.
- ▶ Instrumental reason is revealed as the specific form of reason through which nature is mastered.

# Feminist Political Ecology

- ▶ Political ecology deals with questions of justice and relations of power between humans and other beings, in living landscapes, in place and across places.
- ▶ Political ecology addresses questions of distributive justice, from the distribution of products and benefits derived from land, water, plants, and animals, to the creation and unequal distribution of waste, toxins, ecological damage, and other environmental threats to health and wellbeing.
- ▶ Political ecology also includes issues of justice in processes of organization, deliberation, decisions, and the making of knowledges that guide collective action across scales.
- ▶ Feminist political ecology (FPE) emerged as an academic field in the 1990s.



## Cont.

Feminist political ecologists, Rocheleau et al. (1996) offer a framework, within which gender is treated as “a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for ‘sustainable development’” (as cited in Elmhirst 2011, p. 129)

- ▶ FPE brings together and analyzes the insights, findings, and questions generated by a diverse range of feminist scholars and activists, from those engaged in women and development, gender and agriculture, gender and development, and gender and environment, as well as ecofeminism (Merchant 1980, Shiva 1988, Mies and Shiva 1993).
- ▶ FPE has contributed to the critique of sustainable development, which appeared in the late 1980s and rose to prominence as a development paradigm after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, and provided a platform for work on gender and sustainable development (Braidotti et al. 1994).
- ▶ It has also shaped the academic work on political ecology (PE), which appeared in the 1980s as a political and environmental critique of development and a political critique of conservation.



## Cont.

- ▶ It came into its own in the 1990s as a critique of corporate- and state-driven sustainable development.
- ▶ Feminist political ecology treats women as both participants and partners in environmental preservation.
- ▶ Feminist political ecology approach “explore the nexus between politics, ecology, development and gender in order to clarify the diverse sources of female oppression and the multiple sites of women’s resistances” (Bryant 1998, p. 86).
- ▶ This approach also helps us explore the causes of struggle of women and men to attain ecologically variable livelihoods for a more sustainable world.
- ▶ Those adopting a feminist political ecology approach “explore the nexus between politics, ecology, development and gender in order to clarify the diverse sources of female oppression and the multiple sites of women’s resistances” (Bryant 1998, p. 86).

## Third World Ecofeminism

- ▶ The construction of some women in the Third World as representatives of “difference” in ecofeminist movements and providing these movements a talismanic stature results in essentializing and dehistoricizing Third World activism (Gaard 1998).
- ▶ One example of this essentialism can be seen in some ecofeminist portrayals of the Chipko movement of India, in which local villagers have organized to prevent the felling of communal woodlands for timber, sometimes by literally hugging trees (Chipko means “to hug” in Hindi) in the face of advancing loggers.
- ▶ The materialist ecofeminist perspective is popularized by the Southern ecofeminists. It is based on a bonding between nature and women based on the labor of women, particularly in the Third World, where women are in a practical as well as emotional/spiritual interaction with nature on a daily basis.
- ▶ Nature is not just a source of survival for them but also shapes their identity. The vast majority of such practicing ecofeminists live in the South by sheer dint of their colonial past and neo-colonial present of exploitation and poverty.

- ▶ Thus, materialist ecofeminists focus on capitalist patriarchy, highlighting the devastating impact of capitalist structures on nature and, as it follows, the lives and livelihoods of poor women across the planet. The fundamental contribution of materialist ecofeminism is that it shows that feminist social justice cannot be achieved without addressing environmental issues in the South.
- ▶ It is based on the simple yet entirely practical idea of the 'environmentalism of the poor', a term popularized by Martinez-Allier (2002).
- ▶ Most women in the Third World are involved in subsistence providing roles and much of their maternal and reproductive role does not conform to the instrumental rationality of the neo-liberal economy.
- ▶ A materialist ecofeminism further elaborates on this by showing exactly how women fulfill this subsistence providing role through their direct interaction with nature, which is the very means of their survival and that of their dependents.

- ▶ A Southern materialist ecofeminism is often traced back to the Chipko (which means 'to stick to' in Hindi) movement in the 1970s when women clung to trees in the early 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas in India, in defiance of axe-wielding contractors.
- ▶ This unprecedented Gandhian tactic employed by illiterate, poor peasant Garhwali women was a strategic move to protect not just their forests but also their own survival and subsistence.
- ▶ However, detractors (Guha 1989; Guha and Gadgil 1992) have characterized Chipko as a peasant movement, rather than an ecofeminist one.

- ▶ A materialist ecofeminist explanation is the key to understanding women's afforestation activism throughout the world. Examples of ecofeminist activism contributing to planetary survival can be seen in the Chipko movement of a peaceful Gandhian protest of hugging trees in defiance of axe-wielding contractors in the Himalayan regions in India (Shiva 1987).
- ▶ Much of the Western essentialist or matricentric ecofeminism (as distinct from social ecofeminism) fails to make real connections between the domination of women and classism, racism, and poverty. Relation with nature is thought of in psycho-cultural terms: rituals of self-blessing of the body, experiencing of the sacrality of the rising moon, the season of the year.

- ▶ Much of the leadership in the Chipko movement has been female, and in a few notable hugging incidents, mainly female. The role of women in the leadership of Chipko, along with the resonance of the metaphor of “hug” with an ethic of care, has led some writers to proclaim Chipko to be an ecofeminist movement (cf. Bandopadhyay and Shiva 1987).
- ▶ As Priya Rangan (2000) points out, once it was transformed into a shining symbol of grass-roots activism, Chipko became a myth, tenuously linked to an imagined space of the Himalayas that represents an ahistorical pristine nature inhabited by simple peasants.



- The Chipko environmental conservation movement in India came to public attention in April 1973 when a group of women in Mandal village, located in the mountainous Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, “hugged” trees in order to prevent them from being felled (Routledge, 1993).
- The notion of “Cut me down before you cut down a tree,” generated a lot of media coverage, bringing with it a new humanized morality to abstract environmental concerns (Guha, 1989).
- The feminist movement popularized Chipko, pointing out that poor rural women walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder, and thus are the frontline victims of forest destruction (Shah, 2008).

# Whose Movements, Whose Leadership?

- ▶ Gendered and often culture-bound assumptions about what constitutes leadership and authority have also prevented recognition of women's participation, power, and perspectives in protection of land, water, forests, rangelands, and wildlife from the depredations and injustices of development and conservation projects alike.
- ▶ The rise of the Chipko movement, with women's power and participation playing a central role, could be construed as a foundational moment of FPE (Rocheleau and Nirmal). [It is one instance among many of women's environmental activism bursting onto the global scene].



## Cont.

- ▶ The Chipko movement served as a dramatic counterfactual to the then-prevailing modernist and imperial image of “third world peasants” as forest destroyers and of women peasants as passive “victims of tradition.”
- ▶ Shiva’s (1988) account of Chipko as a women’s movement brought the story into the academic sphere as well as into environmental and feminist movement circles, and it soon became a classic ecofeminist text.
- ▶ While this version inspired many feminists and women activists the world over, it also inspired a strong and persistent reaction against ecofeminism, including from within the Chipko movement itself.

## Cont.

- ▶ Ramachandra Guha (1990) countered Shiva's (1988) account of the movement as powered by women and feminine values, instead portraying it as a regional and ethnic movement led by men.
- ▶ Guha based his argument on the premise that there were no women leaders (except when they arose as accidental leaders in the absence of men; Guha 1990, 159), and that the leaders were two men from different branches of a Gandhian tradition, one more social and economic (Chandi Prasad Bhatt) and the other more religious and devotional (Sunderlal Bahuguna).
- ▶ While the evidence for a regional cultural and ethnic resistance with religious and political roots is not disputed, the dismissal of women's central place in the movement suggests a patriarchal vision of "leadership."
- ▶ The denial of women's leadership and the claim of women having become accidental leaders in the absence of local men fly in the face of multiple instances of women engaging in standoffs against timber contractors armed with chainsaws, while the village men were away, or in other cases against the men of their own villages intent on clearing local forests for state-sponsored agricultural development projects.

## Cont.

- ▶ Chipko quickly became a lightning rod in the battle over feminist essentialist versus reactionary antifeminist, versus intersectional approaches to women's environmental activism in the context of larger or more complex environmental movements (See: Gururani 2002).
- ▶ The debate on Chipko turned on the issue of intersectionality, before the word and the concept had become a mainstay of feminism per se, and of poststructural political ecology.
- ▶ Ecofeminism in the developing countries often manifests itself as women's struggles against state-guided 'development' or state-abetted 'globalization' or market 'reforms' in a bid to save nature and in the process secure their own survival and that of their families.
- ▶ Here, women use a gendered perspective in the light of their own experiences as agents situated in a complex web of relationships with humans and non-humans.

# Basic Insights of Ecofeminism

- ▶ Conceptions of nature and of women have been linked: earth as female, female as earthly/animal-like.
- ▶ Devaluation and abuse of nature and women have gone hand in hand.
- ▶ To overcome this problem, we must analyze and resist both together, and devise an ideal which liberates both.
- ▶ Expansion often made: all oppressions (race, class, gender, environment) are linked and need to be fought together.
- ▶ Ecofeminists provides us with an epistemological critique where women's indigenous knowledges are being marginalized and face extinction and need to be revived.

# Eco-Marxism

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjahao Kipgen  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

# Introduction

*...all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility. - Karl Marx, Capital vol. 1*

- ▶ Humans are natural and social beings
- ▶ Humans transform nature through labour
- ▶ According to Karl Marx (1976) “labour is the father of material wealth, the earth is its mother”. In Marxist thought, humans and nature are the two principle agents in the creation of wealth, thus the need to have them both controlled.
- ▶ ‘The history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist’ - Karl Marx

# Social metabolism

- ▶ Karl Marx introduced the concept of “social metabolism,” which from the late 1850s on occupied a central place in all his economic works.
- ▶ Marx defined the labor process itself as a way in which “man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.”
- ▶ Human production operated within what he called “the universal metabolism of nature.”

NIPER Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngangiah Kipyin  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

## Cont.

- ▶ Marx's concepts of the “universal metabolism of nature,” the “social metabolism,” and the metabolic rift have proven invaluable for modeling the complex relation between social-productive systems, particularly capitalism, and the larger ecological systems in which they are embedded.
- ▶ This approach to the human-social relation to nature, deeply interwoven with Marx's critique of capitalist class society, gives historical materialism a unique perspective on the contemporary ecological crisis and the challenge of transition.



# Dialectics of Nature

- ▶ Engels argued that dialectical reasoning—focusing on the contingent character of reality, contradictory (or incompatible) developments within the same relation, the interpenetration of opposites, quantitative change giving rise to qualitative transformation, and processes of historical transcendence—was essential to our understanding of the complexity and dynamism of the physical world.

NPTEL Online Certification  
Environment and Development  
Prof. Ngamjiahao Ingemant  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

# Marxism and Ecological Economics

- ▶ Marx's (and Engels's) approach to ecological economics took shape from a critique of production, and particularly capitalist commodity production. All commodities were conceived as having the dual forms of use value and exchange value, related respectively to natural-material conditions and monetary-exchange valuations.
- ▶ Marx saw the antagonistic tension between use value and exchange value as key to both the internal contradictions of capitalism and to its conflict with its external natural environment. He insisted that nature and labor together constituted the dual sources of all wealth.
- ▶ By incorporating only labor (or human services) into economic value calculations, capitalism ensured that the ecological and social costs of production would be excluded from the bottom line.

## Cont.

- ▶ A distinctive characteristic of Marxian ecological theory has been an emphasis on unequal ecological exchange or ecological imperialism, in which it is understood that one country can ecologically exploit another—as in Marx’s famous reference to how, for more than a century, England had “indirectly exported the soil of Ireland,” undermining the long-term fertility of Irish agriculture.
- ▶ In recent years, Marxian theorists have extended this analysis of ecological imperialism, coming to see it as integral to all attempts to address the ecological problem.

# Marx and Nature

- ▶ The major problem with modern ecological thought is that it is far too idealistic. Marx and Engel's ecology is rooted in their materialism in the assumption that the natural world is the foundation for all that exists. Physical reality, according to Marx, "is independent of and prior to thought".
- ▶ By examining Marx's social ecology Foster intends to bring Marx to the serious attention of ecologists who have failed to appreciate the implications of Marxist theory for understanding the ecological crisis of our time.

# Materialism

- ▶ Materialism as a theory of the nature of things arose at the beginning of Greek philosophy. “It has persisted down to our time.” Bertrand Russell was to observe early in this century, “in spite of the fact that very few eminent philosophers have advocated it. It has been associated with many scientific advances, and has seemed, in certain epochs, almost synonymous with a scientific outlook.”
- ▶ In its most general sense materialism claims that the origins and development of whatever exists is dependent on nature and “matter”, that is, a level of physical reality that is independent of and prior to thought.

## Cont.

- ▶ Marx's materialist conception of history focused principally on "practical materialism." "The relations of man and nature" were "practical from the outset, that is, relations established by action".
- ▶ According to Marx, we transform our relation to the world and transcend our alienation from it - creating our own distinctly *human-natural relations* - by acting, that is, through our material praxis.

# Materialism and Nature

- ▶ “Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx’s Early Writings, p. 328, cited in Foster, 2000, p. 72).
- ▶ For Marx, human beings are a part of nature; nature provides the material means of life for humans (air, water, food, sun, and shelter), as well as the tools needed to access these material needs.

# Materialism and Nature

- ▶ Humans relate to nature through the production of goods as well as the reproduction of species. It is through the production process that humans transform nature into products for human use. The reproduction process both assures the continuation of society as well as the regulation of the amount of resources required from the environment.
- ▶ The first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, Marx and Engels write, “is that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to ‘make history’. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing, and various other things...”



# Materialism and Nature

- ▶ The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life...
- ▶ “... the production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation ...appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other hand as a social relation” (Marx and Engel, Collected Works, Vol. 5, pp. 41-43).
- ▶ The materialism that makes life and society possible, as well as the means by which men and women manipulate the natural environment to obtain essential goods, are the foundation of Marx’s social theory. These means of relating to the natural world are through production and reproduction.

# Alienation from Nature

- ▶ Marx's early *Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 are best known for developing his concept of “alienated labour” under capitalism.
- ▶ The theme running through his early manuscripts is a view of history in which exploitation of workers and of nature go hand-in-hand [For Marx the fundamental source of alienation was our estrangement from nature]
- ▶ *Man lives on nature - means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.*

## Cont.

- ▶ Capitalism simultaneously and of necessity exploits the land and the people and sacrifices the interests of both on the altar of profit. Philosophically, the approach that capitalism takes to the environment, and the attitude it forces us to adopt, is one of separation and alienation. As a species we are forcibly cut off from the land, separated from nature, and alienated from coevolving with it.

## Cont.

For Marx and Engels, writing in *The German Ideology*, human activity had the potential to alienate all creatures from their environments:

- ▶ The “essence” of the fish is its “being,” water... The “essence” of the freshwater fish is the water of a river. But the latter ceases to be the essence of the fish and so is no longer a suitable medium for existence as soon as the river is made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dyes and other waste products and navigated by steamboats, or as soon as its water is diverted into canals where simple drainage can deprive fish of its medium of existence.

## Cont.

- ▶ Capitalist production...disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; it therefore violates the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil.... The social combination and organization of the labor processes is turned into an organized mode of crushing out the workman's individual vitality, freedom and independence.... (Marx in volume 1 of *Capital*)

# Capitalism

Under the rule of capital, the greater the wealth:

- ❑ The more it becomes concentrated in the hands of few;
  - ❑ The more extensive is the mass of workers and their productivity;
  - ❑ The larger the surplus population;
  - ❑ The more intensive is the exploitation of these masses.
- 
- ▶ Over population in capitalist societies - defined as the portion of the population that is denied full access to the means of subsistence - is therefore caused by the rule of capital itself.
  - ▶ It is Foster's contention that industrial technology and demographic factors are not the major cause of the environmental destruction around us. While certainly real, these material forces are intimately rooted in the social relations of production - that is, the institution of capital and its ever-expanding drive for accumulation.

# Capitalism

- ▶ Consequently, demographic and technological forces are not responsive to the will of the individual; rather they are responsive to the needs and interests of capital. And the needs and interests of capital are simple: the ever greater accumulation of more capital, or simply, profit.
- ▶ While all societies have had impact on their environments in terms of depletion and pollution, some even to the point of collapse, the problems have been localized because the societies were small. Capitalism, however, is a world-wide system with both peripheral and core nations.
- ▶ Because capitalism is based on growth, there is a drive to expand and intensify markets, to commodify all goods and services, to create new “needs” and luxuries, and to stimulate ever greater levels of consumption.
- ▶ Because of this drive, core nations have a tremendous consumption rate of raw materials and energy; within nation states - core or periphery - wealthy individuals and classes also have higher rates of consumption.

# Capitalism

- ▶ With the expansion of population and industrial activity, Foster writes, “the scale of human economic processes began to rival the ecological cycles of the planet, opening up as never before the possibility of planet-wide ecological disaster.
- ▶ Under the rule of capital, human societies have growth in both population and in the power of their technology. This growth has led to the ever more intensive mining of raw materials and energy from the earth and consequently to the accelerated depletion and pollution of the planet.



# Capitalism

- ▶ Growth is not inherent in industrial production which simply consists of rational technologies and social practices to exploit the environment for human use. Rather, the commitment to economic growth stems from the nature of capitalism itself.
- ▶ The objective of capitalism is to maximize the rate of profit as quickly and efficiently as possible; it is a system of economic accumulation. A stationary capitalism, one that rejects economic growth and expansion is a contradiction in terms.

# Capitalism

- ▶ The men who control the economic institutions in society are inextricably committed to economic growth, and through their power and influence it has become an unquestioned goal of social life.
- ▶ But serious environmental problems are not simply due to our numbers and consequent increase in consumption and waste. The type of technologies used to manufacture goods, the type of agriculture used to grow and process food, the type of transport used for goods and people are also factors in our environmental impact.

# Capitalism

- ▶ The drive for profit has led capitalists to integrate science into the industrial production process, integration that, true to form, pays little attention to environmental consequences.
- ▶ New technologies have replaced older ones. Synthetic detergents have replaced soap powder; synthetic fabrics have replaced clothing made out of natural fibers (such as cotton and wood); aluminium, plastics, and concrete have replaced steel and lumber; truck freight has displaced railroad freight...

# Capitalism

- ▶ “...high powered automobile engines have displaced the low-powered engines of the 1920s and 1930s...synthetic fertilizer has in effect displaced land in agricultural production; herbicides have displaced the cultivator; insecticides have displaced earlier forms of insect control” (Foster 1999, p. 114)
- ▶ Since World War II, capitalism has employed science to develop a production system that is hostile to the environment, a “counter-ecological” system of production.
- ▶ Within the system of capitalism nature rarely enters into the equation. Raw materials are commodities, only their exchange values matter. The environment as a whole has little value; pollution in the production process can be carted to landfills, dissipated through smokestacks, or dumped into our oceans.

# Capitalism

- ▶ “The profit making relation has become the sole connection between human beings and nature. This means that while we can envision more sustainable forms of technology that would solve much of the environmental problems, the development and implementation of these technologies is blocked by the mode of production - by capitalism and capitalists...”
- ▶ “Large corporations make the major decisions about the technology we use, and the sole lens that they consider in arriving at their decisions is profitability” (Foster, 1999, pp. 123-124).

# Critique of Capitalism

- ▶ Eco-Marxism (ecological research with Marxist thought and action) views the on-going environmental degradation as the result of a destructive economic and political system - capitalism (Foster et al, 2010).
- ▶ The root causes of social injustice and environmental degradation is a capitalist world where the attainment of profit at all cost is the mantra.
- ▶ The Eco-Marxist perspective is of the view that the force (capitalism) that subjugates the proletariat is the same force that subjugates and destroys the Earth, and its destruction will usher in the emancipation of both.

## Cont.

- ▶ Capitalism treats nature as the “other”, external to human existence and a free gift it can use any way to fulfil its profit seeking endeavours.
- ▶ Burkett and Foster (2006) note that “capitalism’s failure to incorporate into its value accounting, and its tendency to confuse value and wealth, were fundamental contradictions in the regime of capital itself”.
- ▶ In this sense, Karl Marx saw that capitalism as a system depended on the accumulation of value even if it was to the detriment of nature.

# Concluding Remarks

- ▶ Marx's theory of metabolic rift grew out of a response to the nineteenth-century crisis of soil fertility. The problems of accelerated tempo, increasing scale, and spatial disjuncture (the separation of town and country) in capitalist production were already systematically stressed by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century.
- ▶ Socialist ecologists have argued that capitalism has generated an acceleration of the human transformation of the Earth system, occurring in two major phases: the Industrial Revolution beginning at the end of the eighteenth century and the rise of monopoly capitalism, particularly in its mature stage following the Second World War—including the postwar scientific-technical revolution marked by the development of nuclear power and widespread commercial use of synthetic chemicals.
- ▶ In the book *The Ecological Rift* (2010), Brett Clark, Richard York, and Foster integrated the Marxian metabolic rift analysis with the planetary-boundaries framework, describing it as a series of rifts in the Earth system. In this view, today's planetary emergency related to crossing these boundaries could be called “the global ecological rift,” referring to the disruption and destabilization of the human relationship to nature on a planetary scale, arising from the process of capital accumulation without end.



## Cont.

- ▶ Continued exponential economic growth cannot occur without expanding rifts in the Earth System. Therefore, society, particularly in rich countries, must move towards a stationary state or steady-state economy, which requires a shift to an economy without net capital formation, one that stays within the solar budget. Development, particularly in the rich economies, must assume a new form: qualitative, collective, and cultural; one that emphasizes sustainable human development in harmony with Marx's original view of socialism.
- ▶ Such a shift away from capital accumulation and towards a system of meeting collective needs based on the principle of enough is obviously impossible in any meaningful sense under the regime of capital accumulation. What is required, then, is an ecological and social revolution that will facilitate a society of ecological sustainability and substantive equality.
- ▶ For Marxist ecological thinkers, this dire state of affairs has led to the development of a two-stage strategy for ecological and social revolution. The first stage focuses on “What Can Be Done Now?”—that is, on what is realistic in the short term under present conditions, while necessarily going against the logic of capital accumulation.

## Cont.

- ▶ The long-term goal of systemic transformation raises the issue of a second stage of ecological revolution, or the ecosocialist phase. The primary question, of course, is the historical conditions under which this change can come about.
- ▶ Marx referred to the environmental pressures of his day as an “unconscious socialist tendency,” which would require the associated producers to regulate the social metabolism with nature in a rational way.
- ▶ This tendency, however, can only be realized as the result of a great revolution carried out by the greater part of humanity, establishing more egalitarian conditions and processes for governing global society, including the requisite ecological, social, and economic planning.
- ▶ Today, we need an Ecological Revolution equivalent in depth and scope to those earlier transformations.
- ▶ Hence, “a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large,” altering the system of social-metabolic reproduction, provides the only alternative to the impending “common ruin of the contending classes.”