

# Marx was No Green

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[Simply Marxism](#)

There are Greens who espouse an "ecological Marxism" and claim that if Marx were around today he would support organic agriculture and a steady state economy based on renewable resources that provides everyone with "sufficiency". In such an economy the poor and rich countries would converge, with the former increasing somewhat and the latter shrinking a lot. The most notable exponent of this view is [John Bellamy Foster](#), the editor of [Monthly Review](#). (We will call him JBF for short.) He goes through the writings of Marx and tortures them until they deliver a green essence.

JBF draws our attention to a number of Marx's views that you could use to start building a case that he was a Green. Marx was concerned about the destruction of natural stocks of fertile soil, forests and fish needed by future generations. He also commented on how consumption often included frivolities that reflected people's alienation rather than real needs and that human thriving requires more than increased consumption. JBF also correctly points out that when Marx talked about mastering nature he did not mean destroying it but mastering its laws and harnessing it accordingly. However, from here on the case begins to unravel.

JBF tries to extract greenness from the fact that Marx was a materialist who believed we lived in a material world where we depended on plants and animals for food, water to drink and air to breath. This is a long stretch.

The greening of Marx of course requires JBF to explain away how Marx and Engels talked about communism unleashing the productive forces. He claims this thoroughly ungreen viewpoint was confined to their youthful less mature writings. This is not true as these quotes from the 1870s attest.

In [Part 1 of Marx's Critique of the Gotha Programme](#) of 1875 we read:

*Let us take, first of all, the words "proceeds of labor" in the sense of the product of labor; then the co-operative proceeds of labor are the total social product.*

*From this must now be deducted: First, cover for replacement of the means of production used up. Second, additional portion for expansion of production. Third, reserve or insurance funds to provide against accidents, dislocations caused by natural calamities, etc.*

And further down in Part I we read:

*In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly -- only then then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*

Then there is Engel's [Anti-Duhring](#) of 1877, the drafts of which were all discussed with Marx. Here we read:

*The expansive force of the means of production bursts the bonds that the capitalist mode of production had imposed upon them. Their deliverance from these bonds is the one precondition for an unbroken, constantly accelerated development of the productive forces, and therewith for a practically unlimited increase of production itself. Nor is this all. The socialised appropriation of the means of production does away, not only with the present artificial restrictions upon production, but also with the positive waste and devastation of productive forces and products that are at the present time the inevitable concomitants of production, and that reach their height in the crises. Further, it sets free for the community at large a mass of means of production and of products, by doing away with the senseless extravagance of the ruling classes of today and their political representatives. The possibility of securing for every member of society, by means of socialised production, an existence not only fully sufficient materially, and becoming day by day more full, but an existence guaranteeing to*

*all the free development and exercise of their physical and mental faculties — this possibility is now for the first time here, but it is here.*

JBF also has to misconstrue Marx's constant reference to the fact that capitalists are compelled by the forces of competition to accumulate in order to survive, by suggesting that he actually disapproved of the process. For Marx the plowing back of much of the surplus value rather than spending it all on extravagant consumption was what made capitalism superior to previous societies where there was a compulsion to stagnate. Capitalism was compelled by its nature to deliver economic and social progress.

Under communism, the robust development of the productive forces will lead both to the qualitative improvements in the products we produce and to the use of increasing amounts of energy and materials. This would occur not just through accumulation but also through greater investment in research and development and through making each generation of plant and equipment better than the last. It is not hard to imagine the uses. Increased automation of factories and homes will require billions of robots. People will want ready access to various recreation facilities such as gyms, gardens, artificial ski slopes, master chef kitchens, laboratories, workshops and research facilities. The requirements of an increasing population will also have to be considered. While the population is expected to plateau and then decline later this century, under communism you would expect it to start rising again as the economic burden of having children will decline. We need large emergency facilities to deal with super-volcanoes and tsunamis. We will have to prepare for the effects of major climate change such as rising sea levels and eventually the next ice age. Major space programs will among other things protect us from meteors and allow us to start moving off the planet in order to explore, settle and exploit extraterrestrial resources. It will be a long time before we run out of things to do with iron, steel, glass etc. This increasing production under communism will proceed with an on-going decoupling from impacts on the environment. We will see food produced with less and less use of land and water, and the industrial waste streams in extraction, production and disposal cleaned up and reduced.

JBF's *pièce de résistance* is to pick up on Marx's analysis of the contradiction between town and country. In the separation of town and country, Marx was concerned about two things. Firstly it stunted the brains of those in the country

and ruined the physical health of those in the city. Secondly it meant a break in the nutrient cycle as human waste and food scraps were not returned to the farm but instead dumped in rivers and oceans. This transfer of people from the land to cities was an inevitable part of capitalist development. Capitalist farming needed less workers and the cost to the soil and to workers of concentrating the latter in the cities was of no concern to industrial capitalists.

However, these problems are being resolved without having to spread the population evenly over the landscape. High density living in large cities can now be quite healthy and comfortable. Living in the countryside no longer means being cut off from the world given modern modes of transport and communications. This modern transport can also truck in fertilizer, be it human waste, animal manure or the synthetic kind that is now produced in abundance. Indeed, the present concern is excessive nutrients and resulting emissions into ground water or the atmosphere. The best hope for dealing with this under present capitalist conditions is through increased regulation and better management including greater adoption of precision farming.

The organic farming favored by JBF is not the best thing for the environment. It does not allow the judicious use of synthetic fertilizer and so requires rotations that include nitrogen fixing legumes that are simply plowed back into the soil. It also has a taboo on genetically modified crops that improve yields. So, a world of organic agriculture would require far more land being assigned to farming to get the same net crop, and less for forests and other natural uses.

It is very important that red and green are seen as being at total odds. Humanity and the environment require economic progress and communism is impossible without it. The sooner we have a vocal Marxism supporting economic growth, and un-green things such as nuclear power and genetic engineering, the better.