



## James Richard O'Connor's Ecological Marxism\*

The late James O'Connor, founder of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, contributed decisively to the development of ecological Marxism. As a self-described Polányian Marxist and activist, he has often been misrepresented. His early works carefully considered people's material conditions and inter- and intra-class contradictions. A distinctive approach emerged already by the late 1960s, manifest in the publication of *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (O'Connor 1970). A work that merits revisiting, it helps to grasp the importance of dialectical understandings of revolutionary situations and outcomes. It is premised on understanding social institutions as constantly shaping each other and through such processes bringing about social change. By identifying the concrete interests of various class fractions and explaining the dialectical relationships among those class fractions, O'Connor offered one of the most convincing explanations of the Cuban Revolution. To him, the preceding economic structure was superseded by means of dynamics internal to that structure and dialectically related to external U.S. imperialist policies. Contradictions within Cuban society, reflected in the shifting power balance within state institutions, resulted in a turn from an initial market-friendly reformist trajectory to a full-blown state socialist path involving variable policies of nationalisation in key pre-existing monopoly sectors, wealth redistribution, and limited private sector inducements.

This kind of analytical framework further evolved into addressing the relationship between capitalism and the state, as well as clarifying linkages between imperialism and economic processes. *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* is but one of the better known of his writings that emerged from this line of research. In that work, O'Connor magisterially showed how to grasp the role of the state in the U.S. by means of analysing the activities of and tensions between classes and their internal fractions (O'Connor 1973). By doing so, he was able to point to contradictions that would lead to, among other things, undermining the status of workers employed in the monopoly capitalist sector and thereby bringing struggles over state finances and policies to the boiling point. Much of what he wrote became reality, especially relative to the making of increasingly insecure employment. What is of even greater interest is that O'Connor promoted an understanding of the state as a site of struggle with increasingly far-reaching consequences for people's living conditions, as more people become proletarianised and thereby forced into dependence on state assistance and as the costs of

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monopoly capital's profits are ever more socialised via state interventions, including budgetary policies and taxations systems.

The ecological crisis, in both capitalist and state socialist countries but for different reasons (Gare 1993), laid bare the inadequacy of Marxist approaches that insist on the development of the material forces of production (i.e. fossil fuel based industrialisation) as a prerequisite of achieving socialism. In fact, the development of forces of production predicated on a narrow understanding of technological progress has brought about the ecological crisis by means of sustained destructive impacts on the environment. By doing so, productive forces and conditions of production are themselves undermined. It was in an overall context of an increasingly discredited institutionalised Marxist orthodoxy in state socialist countries that, by the 1980s, O'Connor's attention turned to the ecological crisis and its social causes. His materialist dialectical approach continued through forays into environmental issues and his efforts to rectify what he saw as the absence of systematic Marxist accounts of the ecological crisis. This was and is a collective effort that began with those who participated in the fateful 1988 seminar at University of California Santa Cruz that also gave rise to the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (O'Connor 1988a). This germinal intellectual turning point oversaw the confluence of left-leaning ecological thought with a diversity of leftist anti-capitalist approaches, including variants of Marxism and feminism as well as early works by the likes of no less than Marxist environmental sociologist John Bellamy Foster, current Editor of *Monthly Review* (e.g. Foster 1992, 1996). The creative and illuminating outcomes of this confluence and, to a large extent, interweaving of disparate currents are among the lasting legacies bequeathed to us (Kovel 2005; Salleh 1997; Turner and Brownhill 2006).

It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that James O'Connor was among the first in the English-speaking North American and European worlds to develop a Marxist theory of the ecological crisis. This search for a new approach is in keeping with a long Marxist tradition (excepting state socialist apparatuses), traceable to Marx and Engels themselves, of renovating theory in relation to concrete changes in society. O'Connor saw many different sets of relations drawn into the destructive vortex of capitalism. Hence, in keeping with Marx's method, O'Connor deemed the processes whereby the conditions of production are undermined to be dialectical at multiple levels, including consciousness. The ecological crisis, as a transformation of nature, implies social transformation, such as the rise of environmental movements and the very recognition that classical Marxist conceptions are inadequate (O'Connor 1988a, 3–4). In this, he was long preceded by Marxist feminists and he never went far enough to encompass social reproduction processes fully in his empirical work. He instead did so in the course of his theoretical development. He was concerned about the dialectical reproduction of ecological processes (including natural resources), human beings and their self-realisation potential, social interconnectedness, and cultural processes.

Despite the label, ecological Marxism (just like ecofeminism or ecosocialism) is actually not about explaining or investigating ecosystems per se. Ecology did not

emerge from Marx's theories (which at most sought to explain why capitalist relations are both socially and environmentally destructive), nor have the overwhelming majority of ecologists ever draw from Marx (or Engels) to develop methods or theories. The ecology in ecological Marxism refers to movements and ideas about nature and how we (mainly in capitalist societies) relate to the rest of nature (see Haila and Levins 1992, ix). At least in O'Connor's original estimation, the matter is about the intertwined contradictions associated with the ecological, personal, and communal conditions that capitalist relations treat as sources and sinks, sources that capitalists pretend are inexhaustible and sinks that capitalists pretend can be polluted or dumped on endlessly. In other words, the drive for the endless accumulation of capital—and the state apparatuses that support that drive—leads to the undermining of the very processes that enable the reproduction of capital. Profits are privatised, while costs are socialised and at the same time offset onto the rest of nature. The regular workings of capital generate conditions within which social reproduction itself can become unsustainable and environmental degradation becomes rife. This is also in full agreement with Marxist and socialist feminists like Nancy Fraser and Silvia Federici, who have long understood that personal conditions of life and communal conditions of production are central to these tendencies of capitalism to undercut the very social and ecological basis of its existence. It is also fully in agreement with ecological Marxists like Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster. Any rift among ecological Marxists is unjustifiable, as it cannot be explained by less or more adherence to Marx's (and Engels') original insights about the relationship between capitalist societies and the rest of nature.

To build a Marxian theoretical framework worthy of addressing the ecological crisis, O'Connor drew on Polányi's understanding of Marx's concept of conditions of production; that is, the concept of fictitious commodities. As Foster (and others) have pointed out, Polányi had already understood the natural and social impossibility of self-regulating markets (Foster 1995, 106). Polányi expressed the matter thus:

The crucial point is this: labor, land, and money are essential elements of industry; they also must be organized in markets; in fact, these markets form an absolutely vital part of the economic system. But labor, land, and money are obviously not commodities; the postulate that anything that is bought and sold must have been produced for sale is emphatically untrue in regard to them. In other words, according to the empirical definition of a commodity they are not commodities. (Polányi [1944] 2001, 75)

Yet they are all treated as if they were commodities, and this is why they end up being fictitious commodities. But O'Connor went much further than Polányi by redefining fictitious commodities as everything that enables the capitalist mode of production to exist, including not just land, but more broadly what is manifestly not produced by people (or not by people alone), such the atmosphere, rocks, forests, etc. (O'Connor 1988b). The capitalist basis on fictitious commodities for capitalism's very existence has many repercussions, one of which is superimposing, by often violent appropriation (hence the crucial importance of the state),

exchange-value (and even use-value, some would argue) on what is neither produced by human labour, nor by capitalist forms of production. This is to return to Marx's original understanding of the material conditions of life, within which are also the economic conditions of production (see Preface in Marx [1859] 1977). However, Marx did not see the development of the forces of production as leading to the undermining if not fatal debilitation of the material conditions of life, and, with that, future prospects for the development of qualitatively different forces of production (O'Connor 1988c, 13; see also Tanuro 2010).

In hindsight, and ironically, it could be said that O'Connor actually did not follow Polányi at all. First, commodities are socially produced and are social constructs. This means that land, labour, and money are no more and no less fictitious than markets, profits, and wages, for example. Second, O'Connor understood, following Marx, that commodities have a double characteristic in capitalism, as bearers of both use- and exchange-value. O'Connor clearly rejected the notion that money is a fictitious commodity in his earlier work, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*. Instead, he discussed social struggles over space (e.g. land) and infrastructure, which includes money. This means that O'Connor had in mind a notion not too different from, for example, the late Neil Smith: nature, including human nature and space, are never pre-given categories or processes outside of a mode of production. A mode of production, especially capitalism, implies specific kinds of evolving dialectical relations within society and between society and the rest of nature. Therefore, land, labour, and money cannot be thought about as if they were fictitious commodities. They are not phenomena that lie outside of capitalist relations. They are part of each other or, better yet, mutually constitutive as part of a totality called the capitalist mode of production, including the ways in which people in capitalist societies think about and relate to nature. This is what Neil Smith meant by the otherwise provocative notion of the "production of nature" (Smith 1984, 34–65), which, just as in the case of ecological Marxism in general, has nothing to say about actually existing biophysical processes that exist beyond social relations. Unfortunately, most ecological Marxists continue to misconstrue or misunderstand Neil Smith's concept, often taking it literally. Furthermore, the reason why labour, land, money appear as commodities is not because of some trick that can be exposed by discovering their facticity. They appear as commodities because of what Marx pointed out as the multiple forms of alienation that develop as a result of capitalism.

The ever intensifying development of the forces of production therefore brings about an additional contradiction that in Marx's writings was conceptually at best underdeveloped (e.g. Marx [1867] 1992, 475, 505), if not largely absent. Not only do forces and relations of production establish a main source of contradiction in the capitalist mode of production, but so do the conditions and forces and relations of production. This latter source of contradiction, where the development of forces of production and the relations of production undermine the conditions of production, O'Connor called the Second Contradiction. This contradiction may manifest itself in many forms, such as communities organising against polluting factories or in under-production problems related to resource

exploitation. All this follows Marx's own logic, extending Marx's original insights to the ecological crisis. The Second Contradiction Thesis was never stated by O'Connor as an addendum to Marx, much less as a critique of Marx's philosophical foundations.

Relative to political prospects, the intrinsically dual contradiction characterising the capitalist mode of production opens up two possible paths to socialism, or, viewed in current understandings, ecosocialism (a term from which O'Connor kept some distance, but likely would have come to accept). One is due to the (eventual) contradiction between forces and relations of production (once the forces of production have been developed to the fullest potential for the mode of production), and the other is due to the inherent contradiction between the relations and forces of production and the conditions of production. These contradictions can overlap or can mitigate each other's effects to make matters seem stable, delaying the full eruption of crisis. Regardless, the first and second contradictions are part of the same overarching processes tied to the capitalist mode of production, so that, for example, environmental movements and class struggle are necessarily intertwined, even if, for example, environmentalists and union leaders may not be able to perceive the close connection. In fact, this is why O'Connor deemed it important to develop ecological Marxism, so as to establish the basis for developing the theoretical tools to enable the joining of diverse forms of struggle as different aspects of the same overall problem and towards democratising production and the state, which in capitalism plays a crucial role in mediating and shaping access to ecological, communal, and personal conditions of production.

Ecological crisis, public health crises, infrastructural collapse, in their uneven and combined forms, all imply social crisis at different institutional and wider social levels. Once the undermining of production conditions affects entire societies, beyond circumscribed communities (as with colonialism, racist ghettoisation, etc.), over- or under-production problems may not compensate for their obverse. For example, air pollution can lead to such public health problems as to reduce the availability of healthy workers, also employed in polluting industries, and to increase work-hours lost to illness. The outcome may be public protests and political pressures for the elimination of polluting industries, in spite of their profitability. At the same time, workers may historically be losing jobs because of mechanisation in polluting and other industries, leading to diminishing purchasing power among fractions of the working class. In such a case, capitalist relations eventuate into limits to profitability, which are hampered as a result of both kinds of contradictions (O'Connor 1988c, 11–14).

Most Marxists and ecosocialists of various persuasions tend to focus on and often simplify O'Connor's Second Contradiction thesis, as if it were largely a reiteration of Marx's original conceptual framework where conditions of production are merely added to a list. As demonstrated above, however, O'Connor's ideas probed much more deeply into capitalist relations, to its very foundations. Moreover, he was gradually developing a dialectical approach to the ecological crisis that would have eventually brought biophysical processes into greater relief and that would have considered the active influence of biophysical entities

in the unfolding of the ecological crisis. This is clear in the fourth chapter of *Natural Causes*, a book published in 1998 but encompassing works going as far back as the late 1980s. In that chapter, one can perceive O'Connor's more dialectical grasp of the relationship between people and "nature." In this case, it is about the human impact on a stream and how such an impact shaped people's experience and sensibility towards that particular stream as ecosystem, and therefore changed the manner in which people related to that altered stream. The perspective O'Connor was crafting was close to the sort of approach Levins and Lewontin (1985) articulated. It also shared David Harvey's inchoate (and regrettably never further developed) concept of "ecological transformations" (Harvey 1996, 48–57). In fact, O'Connor used the same term, "ecological transformations" (1998, 94). This is an important way to conceptualise the dialectical relationship between people and the rest of nature because transformations go both ways. They pertain to both society and the rest of nature. It is a mutual transformation and since we are part of nature, ecological transformation already implies people acting within nature, being transformed as they transform it (hence the problem with applying dialectics to the vast nonhuman worlds of the rest of nature; see Engel-Di Mauro 2017). This understanding coheres as well with or, rather, follows from Marx's own understandings of nature as inclusive of the social (e.g. Marx [1845] 1978). Regrettably, O'Connor's deteriorating health did not allow him to complete this task, eventually being overtaken by illness and unable to continue with his intellectual endeavours.

The approach O'Connor was developing was not without critiques early on. However, with the benefit of hindsight and social as well as temporal distance, such critiques are complementary with rather than antagonistic to O'Connor's thesis. One main contention rests on the centrality of social reproduction and the pivotal role of gender. Ecofeminists like Ariel Salleh (1997) have rightly pointed out how social conditions of production are ultimately dependent on socially reproductive labour, overwhelmingly shouldered by women and not just in capitalist societies (see also Turner and Brownhill 2006). As Autonomist Marxist Feminist Silvia Federici (2004) has shown, Marx was already in error by underplaying, if not bracketing away, the capitalist contradiction, reaching even the most intimate of household levels, between social reproduction and production relations. Therefore, what is regarded as the first contradiction in classical Marxism is actually derived from another, which involves social relations of reproduction. One could go even further, following Ecofeminist critiques and elaborating on them, and say that the classical formulation of the first contradiction of capitalism is actually contingent on social reproduction and ecological conditions. However, these aspects of the social conditions of production were present within Marx's work, even if insufficiently. More to the point, Ecofeminist and Marxist Feminist critiques are actually consistent with O'Connor's theory, since personal and communal conditions of production are intrinsic to the second contradiction thesis. Instead of a critique, it can be said that the personal and socially reproductive aspects have been much further developed by Ecofeminists and Marxist Feminists, radically improving, rather than undermining, O'Connor's theory.

Joel Kovel, who took the reins of *Capitalism Nature Socialism* between 2003 and 2012, drew from and shared much with O'Connor's perspective (Kovel 2017, 272), but also expressed some key theoretical differences. For Joel Kovel (2007), O'Connor should have emphasised much more the ultimate consequences of the Second Contradiction, aside from the foundational importance of gender relations of domination (Kovel 2005). One is the possibility of capitalist relations leading to the annihilation of most of humanity as a result of what O'Connor himself had identified as the Second Contradiction. In other words, there may not be a resolution to the inherent contradictions of capitalism as the conditions of production would be so compromised as to disable any prospects for socialist alternatives (Kovel and Löwy 2002). While this is important to underline, there is actually no disagreement with O'Connor's view. This is because O'Connor's efforts were instead directed towards showing people of diverse persuasions that in capitalism they have a common enemy and that it is imperative that all forms of struggle be united to overcome capitalism, if anything, for the sake of human survival.

Another problem, Kovel contended, is relative to thinking still in terms of exchange- and use-values, which misses the opportunity to find an escape valve from capitalist ideology and practice. That other possibility and reality is found in the intrinsic value of nature, which yields a different way of relating to the rest of nature that accounts for people's spirituality (Kovel 2014, 18–19). This may be irreconcilable with the Second Contradiction thesis or may be an essential corrective to it. An advantage of Kovel's intrinsic-value approach is its inclusion of widespread feelings and popular cultural perspectives, but the risk, as Kovel himself acknowledged (Kovel 1991), is the degeneration into destructive mythologies or theocracies and highly oppressive social relations based on religious dogma. To make more sense of these potentials, the debate on the concept should be grounded in actually existing social struggles and their outcomes. Any definitive judgements are premature or misplaced without concrete, social contextualisation.

There are still other difficulties that should be pointed out with respect to developing an ecological Marxism that is serious about understanding ecological processes in the struggle for ecosocialism. Social theories are ill equipped to give any guidance on biophysical dynamics and Marxist approaches are no exception (see Engel-Di Mauro 2014). O'Connor correctly found Marx insufficiently materialist when it came to the rest nature, even if Marx voiced in an interspersed fashion his concerns over capitalist environmental destruction, clearly posited humanity as part of nature, and expressed the relationship in terms of universal and specific forms of "metabolism" (Marx [1845] 1978, 1853, [1867] 1992, [1894] 1991). But by following Marx (or Polányi), who drew from and never attempted to establish himself in the natural sciences, O'Connor succumbed to similar problems (O'Connor 1998, 46). One example is when he took up the issue of deforestation in Rondonia, in the Brazilian Amazon. Because he was not studying the characteristics of Amazonian soils or relying on specialised soil science research, he fell for the common misconception that tropical soils are fragile and infertile, a settler-colonial notion that has been refuted decades ago even within the

mainstream of soil science (Schaetzl and Anderson 2005, 388–392; Showers 2006). O'Connor (1998, 44) asserts that both farming and ranching have failed in Rondonia because tropical rainforest soils have been “disturbed.” This stereotype of tropical soils is based on assumptions of soil homogeneity and of completely isolated societies. These views are contradicted by actually existing soil diversity and centuries of soil-altering agriculture, including in Rondonia (Cochrane and Cochrane 2006).

Such views of nature are inconsistent with O'Connor's recognition of the “autonomy of ecological and physical processes” (37). Then again, O'Connor, like virtually all ecological Marxists, never really examined how autonomous ecological and physical processes and changes interact with social ones in the analysis of the relationship between ecosystems and capitalist social relations. O'Connor's Second Contradiction thesis misses the change in biophysical processes per se. We therefore cannot distinguish autonomous nonhuman from human-influenced or human-induced environmental changes. Much of the misconception about biophysical processes, pervasive in Ecological Marxism and Marxism generally, is traceable to reproducing Marx's own limitations and ignoring the path Marx and Engels advocated, which was of keeping up with the biophysical sciences (e.g. Engels 1883; Schwartzman 2009).

Nevertheless, O'Connor's insights and his theoretical framework, as well as learning from the limitations of his framework, all help build a truly Marxist dialectical materialist approach to the ecological crisis, an approach that can be useful towards building ecosocialism, along the lines also specified by ecofeminist thinkers (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999; Gare 2016; Kovel 2007; Löwy 2011; Salleh 2009). So far, there is no real dialectical materialist approach to society–environment relations in ecological Marxism because the focus of attention is mainly on proving Marx to have been ecologically oriented (a debatable assertion based on Marx's few and scattered statements, mainly on soil fertility) and because there is too little study of biophysical processes as such in Marx's writings (but not in Engels' fragmented work, which has other problems; see Engel-Di Mauro 2017). The latter is particularly problematic because the environment side of the society–environment relation must be thoroughly understood if there is to be a development of comprehensive theories and appropriate politics to environmental issues.

For example, climate change has finally been taken up by many Marxists, but the problem is studied almost solely with respect to society and by using at best generic, secondary scientific information, without delving into the debates about and specifics of atmospheric and climate dynamics in the related sciences. This lack of attentiveness to atmospheric dynamics gives the false and politically dangerous impression that overcoming capitalism will resolve the global warming problem. Climate change, however, is not so predictable (as many climatologists know), it operates over multiple time-scales, and it is not only affected by human impact (many nonhuman factors are also involved that increase or dampen radiative forcing effects of greenhouse gas emissions). Moreover, greenhouse gases, once emitted, tend to stay in the atmosphere for decades, so that changing society can only reduce the likelihood of future impact and, if a

threshold is overstepped, such social change might not reverse global warming trends at all (Schwartzman 1996; Tanuro 2012). Even more importantly, already existing and past devastation due to global warming cannot be undone by just changing society. The soils altered by loss of permafrost will not return to their previous characteristics and the melted glaciers will not return just because we have ecosocialism.

Ecological Marxism to date is unable to address these consequences because the main thinking remains stuck in “balance of nature” understandings, a worldview that is ultimately antithetical to Marx’s approach of dialectical materialism. It is also a worldview that will not help us to achieve ecosocialism because the ecological is understood as if all life-forms and physical processes balance each other out. It has been understood by actual ecologists that ecosystems are not really balanced and that they are dynamic, and without any necessary or predictable end-point (Haila and Levins 1992, 2–13). Instead, ecosystems are characterised by highly scale-dependent multiple stable states and dynamic equilibria. This is highly consequential politically because it means we cannot presume that policies on human impact will necessarily lead to harmonious environments to our liking. There are millions of species, all actively shaping the environment and transforming ecosystems, and their actions are both influenced by but also independent of human action. None of this takes anything away from existing Ecological Marxist, ecofeminist, or any other ecosocialist frameworks, critiques, findings, and recommendations. The subsistence perspective espoused by Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen’s subsistence perspective, Ariel Salleh’s (2009) formulation of eco-sufficiency and ecological indebtedness, among other like social approaches, remain essential to ecosocialist objectives, just as much as those recently identified by Michael Löwy (2018):

- (i) achieve a real materialist understanding of the perverse dynamics of the [capitalist] system; (ii) develop a radical critique of the capitalist destruction of the environment; and (iii) project the perspective of a socialist society respecting the “inalienable conditions” of life on Earth.

There is much overlap among differing ecosocialist voices and the work of uniting them is thoroughly under-appreciated and arduous enough. But just as necessary and tough is to study, on their own right, ecosystems—with their many life-forms and physical processes—as well as abiotic environmental dynamics, and not solely focus on the ways societies interact with other species and environments. This cannot be achieved by relying on radical social theories alone, including Marxist work, or on diluted secondary information from conventional, capitalism-unquestioning scholarship in the biophysical sciences. As formidable as Marx’s dialectical materialist method remains in studying social relations as part of ecosystems, or more broadly as part of nature, it cannot guide us through the maze of myriad relations of life-forms and physical dynamics. Try, for example, using Foster’s Metabolic Rift and O’Connor’s Second Contradiction theses to explain how moths feeding on birch tree leaves affect blow flies living off of reindeer carcasses in a subarctic environment (Haila and Levins 1992, 23–27). Neither thesis is equipped even to provide criteria for distinguishing one species

or trophic level from another, let alone any means to study inter-species interactions. Yet without such a grasp of how these kinds of relations unfold, it is not possible to determine what kinds of effects specifically capitalist impacts may have on such subarctic ecosystems and how changes in such inter-species relations can influence people inhabiting the region. In fact, these kinds of issues are not even considered in Ecological Marxism. To reiterate the matter differently, the ecological in Ecological Marxism is little more than a nod to actually existing or past ecosystems. O'Connor may have caught a glimpse of this problem when he wrote that what is needed is an

account of the dialectics of history and nature which locates itself on the interface between natural and social science, or between history and meta-history, and which has a standard for judging what nature *ought to be* as contrasted with what nature is today. (O'Connor 1988a, 2, italics in original)

To locate oneself at a natural–social science interface there must be, at a minimum, the development of collaborative research involving multiple social and biophysical sciences. Accomplishing this feat is impossible in the current state of Ecological Marxism, rife as it is with society-centred frameworks and politically self-marginalising Marxological schisms. A chronic dearth of Ecological Marxists in the social sciences, with an even more infinitesimal presence in the much more numerous biophysical sciences merely compounds the difficulty. The sheer enormity of the task should alone shake up all concerned. The question is whether Ecological Marxists will even become aware of what must be done and finally attempt to rise to the challenge O'Connor began to discern three decades ago.

### Disclosure statement

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