Marx’s Inorganic Body

John P. Clark*

Attempts to find an authentically ecological outlook in Marx’s philosophy of nature are ultimately unsuccessful. Although Marx does at times point the way toward a truly ecological dialectic, he does not himself follow that way. Instead, he proposes a problematic of technological liberation and mastery of nature that preserves many of the dualisms of that tradition of domination with which he ostensibly wishes to break.

INTRODUCTION

“Nature is man’s inorganic body,” according to Marx. But what are we to make of this image? In the view of some recent observers, the conception of nature expressed in this formulation is an ecological one. According to one such commentator, Marx’s vision implies that “it is natural for man, the conscious social being, to act rationally and consciously for the good of all species, which is his own long-range good (since nature is his body).”¹ But the same Marx who sees nature as “man’s inorganic body” also describes “locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules, etc.” as “organs of the human brain.”² At best, we seem to be dealing here with a highly distorted body consciousness.

But perhaps we should not be so hasty in tearing apart the Marxian corpus. As Wordsworth warned us about the impetuously analytical mind, “we murder to dissect.” Instead, we should look at the whole of Marx’s conception of nature, and its relation to his larger problematic. If we do so, we will find more coherence than these conflicting body images might suggest, and deeper contradictions than many might suspect.


ECOLOGIZING MARX: PARSONS

The most extensive recent attempt to defend the ecological character of Marx's work is Howard Parsons' 118-page introductory essay to his collection *Marx and Engels on Ecology*. Yet despite numerous references to ecology and environmental problems and valiant attempts to relate these to Marx, he presents little evidence of truly ecological analysis in Marx's own writings, and fails entirely to demonstrate that Marx's predominant perspective toward nature is ecological. Indeed, in spite of himself, Parsons shows that Marx's position on every practical issue reduces to a concern for the more rational exploitation of nature for human ends.

Although Parsons succeeds in finding abundant evidence of ecological thinking in Marx, he uses a questionable method of interpretation: automatically putting the most ecologically correct construction on every statement. For example, the famous passage concerning "man's inorganic body" is invoked to show that according to Marx, "man participates organically, i.e., dialectically, in nature."3 Presumably, we are to focus all our attention on the "organic" term body. Yet this still leaves us with the rather perplexing and embarrassing fact that the evidence for a reality being "organic" is that it is described as being "inorganic".

Parsons deals similarly with Marx's contention that to say 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." He asks rhetorically: whether there has ever been "a better, a more succinct, ecological statement of man's place in nature than this."4 But Marx's statement is evidence of no more than a naturalist or materialist position. Only a detailed analysis of Marx's conception of the "link" between this human "part" and the rest of nature can determine the extent to which such a view is ecological.

Parsons is rather astute in tracing certain implications of a dialectical analysis that lead far from the mechanistic, instrumentalist direction that Marx and most of the Marxist tradition have taken. He argues, quite cogently, that the "logic of man's dialectical relation to nonhuman nature does in fact lead to the conclusion that the ground of values, if not the values themselves, is prior to and independent of man's conscious intervention in and enjoyment of non-human nature."5 He goes so far as to interpret value not as "an epiphenomenon added to fact," but as "an inherent activity of matter."6 Evolution can thus be seen to have

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 50.
6 Ibid., p. 52.
“a certain directiveness,” in which there is a building up of a temporal structure of levels from the simple to the complex.” Thus, an ecological analysis finds in nature development, emergence, and self-organization.

Significantly, Parsons’ discussion of these issues relies very little on Marx himself. Rather, he looks at the implications of a dialectical and ecological perspective, a position which is certainly not identical with Marx’s work or the Marxist tradition, which has no patent on dialectics. Indeed, the most extensive elaboration of such an ecological dialectic has been Bookchin’s social ecology, which includes a comprehensive critique of Marxian social theory and philosophy of nature.

Parsons sees only the most noble and theoretically extraneous reasons for the rather glaring failure of Marx and Engels to develop the ecological aspects of their thought. There was, he explains, a more pressing theoretical need for the development of the critique of political economy and greater practical need for amelioration of the suffering of the masses. The possibility of a contradiction between an ecological perspective and the Marxian project of technological development, liberation of productive forces, and political centralization is not considered.

Marx’s critique certainly sounds ecological when, as Parsons notes, he condemns capitalism for its “drive towards unlimited extension of production, towards production as an end in itself, towards unconditional development of the social productivity of labour.” However, although Parsons concludes that Marx is arguing for the “essential incompatibility” between capitalist production and “the system of nature,” Marx’s point is not that this expansionism is in conflict with nature, but rather that capital’s quest for surplus value contradicts and limits this development in some ways, to the detriment of humanity. In contrast, an ecological critique would question this very expansionism as being in contradiction with the “system of nature.” To the contrary, the Marxist position, including the version defended by Parsons, holds that after the contradictions between forces and relations of production are resolved, the expansion of production will not be limited, but rather “unfettered.”

Of course, there is still supposed to be a limit in the form of rational control of production on behalf of “man’s” development. This, however, does not mean

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7 Ibid., p. 78.
9 Parsons, Marx and Engels, p. 24.
10 Ibid., p. 29.
11 Ibid.
that there would be any limits based on a larger ecological approach in a nonanthropocentric sense. Parsons seems very naive in claiming that when "essential human needs are secured," people will overcome egocentrism, and that when "there is no need to exploit natural beings," then "exploitation does not occur."

for it is quite conceivable that long after all needs that can reasonably be defined as "essential" are fulfilled, human demands on the natural world could still go far beyond ecologically optimal levels.

Parsons, like most Marxists, fails to address the question of productivist ideology. Any political regime which legitimates itself on the basis of fulfilling "human needs" through the "development of productive forces" has an enormous incentive to expand and manipulate material consumptionist needs as a means of social control. There is no reason to think that a system of centralized state socialism (or state capitalism, which is, in fact, what orthodox Marxism advocates) would fulfill "real" needs, rather than creating artificial ones, or that it would resolve the contradiction between the industrial and technological system and "the system of nature."

Although Parsons notes that Marx and Engels accept the capitalist "strategem" of "subduing" nature for the sake of "human requirements," he holds that their position is ecologically superior to that of capitalism in holding, first, that the mastery should benefit all people; second, that it should "maintain the dialectical balance of natural ecology in harmony with human needs." instead of destroying nature; and finally, that it should include "theoretical understanding and esthetic appreciation" of nature, rather than "contempt."

At best, however, these stipulations yield a reformist environmentalism rather than assuring a radically or even strongly ecological position, for a "mastery" that "maintains" environmental conditions according to the demands of human needs and benefits translates into mere resource management, not ecological practice. The acceptance of an understanding and appreciation of nature is compatible with ecologically unenlightened viewpoints (not to mention the most refined of bourgeois sensibilities).

ECOLOGIZING MARX: LEE

Another notable, though more modest, attempt to salvage Marx as an ecological thinker has been made by Donald C. Lee. It is his position that "both Marxism and capitalism are greedy, violent, and destructive of nature" unless they are "ameliorated" by the kind of humanism found in Marx's early works. Unfortunately, the evidence given in favor of the ecological "early" Marx

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12 Ibid., p. 65.
13 Ibid., pp. 67–68.
consists primarily of vague generalities. We are told, for instance, that Marx recognized that “nature was here first,”\(^\text{15}\) that “the human being is part of nature,”\(^\text{16}\) and that “each of us is identical with each other and with nature.”\(^\text{17}\) On the basis of such “ecological” propositions, we are urged to conclude from these statements that Marxism strives for an “environmentally unalienated social order.”\(^\text{18}\)

Yet it is clear from Lee’s defense that Marx’s analysis is predicated on the very “man-nature dichotomy” that is allegedly absent. Thus, the existence of “ecological difficulties” is attributed to a failure to “master nature” adequately.\(^\text{19}\) Alienation from nature is conceived of in a way that it can be overcome by “the extension of human power over nature,” and, specifically, “by the social development of machines.”\(^\text{20}\) As I show later, what underlies views such as these is a nonecological humanism. Marx’s identification of ecological practice with rational mastery of nature for the good of the human species most definitely preserves the “dichotomy” that reduces nature to an instrument of human development. His decrying of alienation from nature as “man’s” failure to rationally use nature as a means is founded on his affirmation of a deeper alienation from nature.\(^\text{21}\)

In his reply to his critics, Lee falls back on the weak claim (similar to that of Parsons) that since Marx’s view is dialectical, it must be ecological. Thus, we are told that Marx, “for a moment, is clearsighted and sees beyond the myopic view of his age (and ours) to a position in which mankind sees itself as determined by and determinant of nature....”\(^\text{22}\) But recognizing such a “mutual determination” on some level does not demonstrate a strongly ecological analysis. Lee begs the question when discussing the extent to which the actual content of Marx’s conception of the relation between humanity and nature is ecological, and, indeed, dialectical. In fact, Lee provides no evidence that

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 5.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 8.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 9.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 7.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 9.
\(^{21}\) For the sake of space, I will not draw out all the implications of Lee’s acceptance of such principles as “‘overpopulation’ is but a function of ‘underemployment’” (p. 11). It is true that the concept of overpopulation is an ideological one, though today it is used more to legitimate exploitation of the Third World than of the Western proletariat. Nevertheless, the Marxian principle cited, although once an effective immanent critique of the Malthusian premises of political economy, is less than critical from an ecological perspective, even if adapted to the contemporary world economy. The ecological view of population deals not only with the relation between humanity and the system of production, but also with the complex interrelationships between human communities and ecosystems.
Marx's cosmos was even vaguely as ecological as that "enchanted world" of most traditional peoples upon whom Marx looked back with the most civilized contempt.²³

DE-ECOLOGIZING MARX: TOLMAN

Charles Tolman's reply to Lee demonstrates ably, if inadvertently, the extent to which Marx's ideas can be plausibly developed in a nonecological direction. While Tolman sees a certain kind of dialectic at work in history, he does not comprehend this as an ecological dialectic encompassing humanity and the whole of nature in a process of mutual development and unfolding of potentiality. Rather, it remains a human struggle with nature to utilize the latter better as a means for human development. Knowledge of nature is seen as power over nature, in which a "better theoretical understanding of nature" leads to "real mastery of nature."²⁴

Of course, the mastery "moves forward fully conscious of the reciprocity and interdependence of nonhuman nature and human needs and aspirations."²⁵ However, this "full consciousness" turns out to be quite limited when one examines the nature of the project. Our opinion of whether a theory is "ecological" must not be based on what the theorist thinks of the theory. Rather, it must rest on how the theory expresses a certain practical relationship between humanity and nature.

In this case, we find an extreme expression of an important aspect of Marx's thought, his productivism. According to Tolman, the central problem of history is (as Marx said in his "preface" to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) the liberation of the forces of production. Thus, we find that "environmental problems can only be solved by further advances in the forces of technology."²⁶ Of course, ecologists often point out that the ecological crisis has been in large part the result of such technological development. Tolman replies, as a good Marxist technological utopian, that the problem has only been the misuse of technology for capitalist purposes, and that socialist technology will cure all ills.

He does not confront the issue of technological rationality and its truly revolutionary effects on modern society, though he does comment, quite revealingly, on the question of consciousness. Rather than forming a barrier to the

²⁵ Ibid. Presumably, the consciousness will still reside in the "masters" rather than the "mastery"; however, this objectifying language is revealing.
²⁶ Ibid.
development of liberatory consciousness, the continuing expansion of the technolog­
ological system only assures the emergence of critical rationality, because “advance in the forces of production themselves brings with it advance in the consciousness, the motivation and know-how required to bring about the effective transformation of the relations of production.” Such a naive and ahistorical faith in technological development is more understandable for Marx’s epoch, though some of his contemporaries (particularly those in certain dissident anarchist, utopian, aesthetic, and spiritual traditions) managed to escape it. To perpetuate such an uncritical view of technological development today, despite all evidence against a positive correlation between “advances” in productive forces and growth of critical consciousness (not to mention ecological consciousness), is astounding.

ECOLOGICAL TENDENCIES IN MARX’S THOUGHT

It is true that there is an implicit ecological dimension to Marx. His philosophy of nature has affinities with ecological thought to the degree to which it maintains the teleological and dialectical perspective that is characteristic of much of his social analysis. Albert Schmidt has argued that Marx’s materialist dialectic is nonteleological in the sense that it contains no doctrine of immanent teleology, but rather only what Hegel calls the “finite-teleological standpoint” arising from the particular ends posited by human beings. Yet Marx retains more of his Aristotelian and Hegelian heritage than this interpretation allows.

This aspect of Marx’s thought has been forcefully defended by Scott Meikle in his work, Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx. He argues that beginning with the emphasis on grasping the “specific nature” of phenomena in the “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State,” Marx develops a dialectical methodology in which necessary development determined by the nature or essence of the thing is the focus of analysis. According to this view, a phenomenon cannot be adequately understood according to a static, atomistic analysis; rather, it must be comprehended as a being in process or movement in which its ergon or peculiar behavior is related to its telos or completed form of development.

Implied in this teleological dialectic is a profoundly organicist dimension in which the dialectical movement of things is shown to be determined by their place in larger wholes and conditioned by the development of these wholes. These elements of Marx’s thought form the basis for what Rader calls the

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29 Scott Meikle, Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx (La Sa11e, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), pp. 42–43.
"organic totality" model in Marx’s thinking, and for what Ollman discusses as his doctrine of “internal relations.” They are exhibited in Marx’s assertion that “a being that does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being,” and in his analysis of the phenomena of history, in which “the whole thing can be shown in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another)."

On the basis of such concepts, the way is opened for the development of a truly ecological dialectic that avoids what Marx aptly diagnoses as “the antithesis of nature and history.” In such a dialectic, the entire course of natural history, including the emergence of life, consciousness, and self-consciousness (with all its modes of rationality and symbolization) are seen as aspects of the development of a complex whole. Central to such an analysis is an elaboration of the mutual determination of all forms of life within the biosphere as a unity in diversity.

It must be recognized that Marx does on rare occasions move in the direction of such an ecological dialectic. Parsons is able to quote one excellent passage in which Marx presents a social-ecological interpretation of the effects of urbanization on agriculture. Marx perceptively comments that concentration of population under capitalist production prevents “the circulation of matter between man and soil” and has negative effects on both urban health and rural culture. This is one of Marx’s most genuinely ecological analyses in that he integrates the physical, biological, economic, and social aspects of the problem.

Yet Marx himself fails to go very far in developing these rudiments of an ecological dialectic. Quite to the contrary, his thought preserves much of the radically nonecological dualism that is typical of Western thought, and, indeed, of civilization itself. To develop the submerged ecological dimension of Marx would mean the negation of key aspects of his philosophy of history, his theory of human nature, and his view of social transformation. It would mean the destruction of the productivism and instrumentalism that such defenders of Marx as Parsons, Lee, and Tolman still adhere to in varying degrees. The nature of this dominant current in Marx’s thought must now be explored.

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30 See Melvin Rader, Marx’s Interpretation of History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), chaps. 2 and 3; and Bertell Ollman, Alienation: Marx’s Concept of Man in Capitalist Society (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), chap. 3.
33 Ibid., p. 30. For an indication of the direction in which such a “Left Aristotelian” position might develop, see John Ely, “Anarchism and Animism,” in Clark, Promise of Social Ecology.
34 Parsons, Marx and Engels, p. 21.
It is understandable that some might feel inclined to credit Marx with a kind of ecological consciousness because of his image of nature in his early works as "man's inorganic body." Indeed, given the tradition of extreme dualism in Western thought, beginning with Plato's condemnation of matter as the prison of spirit and inert receptacle of form, and extending through Descartes' radical dichotomy between thinking and extended substance, such a recognition of the inextricable interdependence between humanity and nature seems a welcome advance. Yet it is important to grasp the precise significance of this image for Marx and to relate it to other images of nature presented in his work.

The discussion of the "inorganic body" in the *Paris Manuscripts* retains both a dualistic view of humanity and nature and an instrumentalist view of the latter. On the one hand, Marx distinguishes between nature as "organic body," that is, as human body, and nature as "inorganic body," that is, the rest of nature. While a mere distinction between two such realms within material nature is not, obviously, in itself an ontological false step, the valuation underlying the distinction is another question. The "inorganic" quality of "external" nature signifies its instrumental character in relation to an abstracted humanity, which is taken to be the source of all value. Nature is thus valued as a "direct means of life," and as "the material, the object, and the instrument" of the "life activity" of "man."\(^{35}\) Estrangement from nature is in no way taken to mean nonrecognition of intrinsic value throughout nature or of the interrelatedness between human value and the larger unfolding of values over the course of natural history; rather it means the failure of "man" to utilize nature self-consciously and collectively in productivity, that is, in "the objectification of man's species life."\(^{36}\)

The ecological world view proposes that humanity should see itself as part of a larger organic whole, and that although humanity may indeed be the culmination of the present stage of global evolution, it occupies an inseparable place in a biospheric community of life and mind. In contrast, Marx's image of the relationship between humanity and nature remains the proprietary one bequeathed to us when the God of ancient Israel gave Adam dominion over the Earth. In truth, Marx desires to remain truer to Jehovah's wishes than has civilization thus far: when private property in land is abolished, "the earth ceases to be an object of huckstering, and through free labor and free enjoyment becomes once more a true personal property of man."\(^{37}\) Nature, apart from human transformative activity, is accorded no value by "man" (or, perhaps more

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 69.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 59.
accurately, it has a significance which must be repressed, both ideologically and through a praxis of negation). Nature as being-in-itself, or worse, being that is, to no matter how rudimentary a degree, being-for-itself, must be transformed into being for “man.” Through his production, “nature appears as his work and his reality,” and thus, “he sees himself in a world he has created.”

While Marx has been applauded for his conception of “the true resurrection of nature,” and there has developed a tradition of mystical and spiritualized Marxism, this tendency has, at best, a shaky foundation in Marx’s own speculations, for he states clearly that this “resurrection” consists not in the rising up of that nature done in by assassins, such as the Newtonians and the Cartesians, but rather in “man” himself rising up out of the grave of nature. This occurs when private property is abolished and the species collectively appropriates nature, so that the truly human quality of self-creation can be universally achieved for “man.” Only at that stage can “his natural existence become his human existence, and nature become man for him.” Thus far Marx is the prophet not of resurrected nature, but rather of triumphant enlightenment. Wo es war, soll Mensch werden!

It is true that in the Paris Manuscripts Marx rejects a certain kind of opposition between human reality and nature, arguing that “history itself is a real part of natural history.” What is more, he even goes so far as to cite approvingly the interpretation of “the formation of the earth, the development of the earth,” as “self-generation.” Yet rather than taking seriously the idea of human development as part of a larger system of self-unfolding in nature, he quickly reverts to the view of humanity as supreme self-creator. As Jehovah created “man” from formless, lifeless matter, from “the dust of the earth,” Marx’s “man” creates himself without the assistance of any active, developing nature, for “the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labor” so that he has “the visible, irrefutable proof of his own birth through himself.” Nature, apart from “man,” is therefore necessary only as an instrument in this self-creation. This is not, Marx insists, “utility” in the vulgar sense of the pursuit of individual egoistic satisfaction, but it remains a utilitarian view of nature in a broader, universalistic sense. Thus, “nature has lost its mere utility by use becoming human use.”

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38 Ibid., p. 69.
39 Ibid., p. 92.
40 Ibid., p. 98.
41 Ibid., p. 99. Note also the contrast between the concept of such instrumental activity as “participation,” and, for example, the participation mystique of animism, described by Norman O. Brown as “symbolical consciousness, the erotic sense of reality” in Love’s Body (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 254.
42 Ibid., p. 100.
43 Ibid., p. 94.
A similar conception of the relationship between humanity and nature is found in Marx’s mature work. It is now placed within the context of a highly developed problematic of human liberation through productivity, technological development, and control of nature. The most detailed discussion of these issues is found in the *Grundrisse*. In that work, Marx repeatedly stresses the theme that historical progress depends on a continual expansion of the human domination of nature. The bourgeois epoch is judged progressive for humanity, because, despite economic exploitation, there has been an enormous expansion of the forces of production. Capitalism, in its ruthless drive toward expansion, has created the preconditions for that many-sided human self-development which is the goal of history, a development that depends on an abundance attainable only through conquest of the forces of nature:

When the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc. created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity’s own nature?44

Marx waxes eloquent, indeed almost rhapsodic, in his depiction of the ever-expanding power of capital to create new social forms, new human capacities and needs, and new possibilities for human development, for what he earlier called “species-life.” This, he says, is “the great civilizing influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity and as nature-idolatry.”45 Previously, humanity was limited by conceptions of nature which accorded it respect, or even (perish the thought!) reverence. In Marx’s view, such attitudes and sensibilities are a product of humanity’s inability to master nature. As he formulates it in *The German Ideology*, early people were “overawed like beasts” by nature’s “all-powerful and unassailable force.”46 In the *Grundrisse* he speculates that nature mythology was an attempt at illusory domination of nature through the imagination, when actual domination was impossible. Needless to say, “it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery.”47

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46 Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 19. Marx’s term is *imponieren*, literally, “to impress.” Since “beasts” in nature, while giving evidence of fear and flight reactions, seem to have little propensity to being “overawed” by superior forces, perhaps his model was a domesticated European beast “overawed” by a paterfamilias en colère.
Thus, one of the great contributions of capital to human progress is its supposed completion of this process of "disenchantment of the world," owing to its successes in mastering nature. Marx is quite frank in his description of what is left of nature after all "mystical veils" are stripped away—and his vision is far from ecological.

For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production.48

Putting aside the narrowness of the bourgeois conception of utility, this result is precisely what is required for the project of human emancipation through the expansion of productivity, for it is only "capital's ceaseless striving" that "drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness (Naturbedürftigkeit) and thus creates the material elements for the development of... rich individuality."49

What Marx finally proposes in the *Grundrisse* as the prerequisite for the emergence of the realm of freedom out of the realm of necessity is a highly automated technological system in which abundance is ultimately achieved through processes of efficient collective mastery of nature. On the one side stands "man," who, having passed through the "steeling school of labor," has sufficiently subjugated internal nature, armored himself, and transformed himself into a being capable of conquering all foes. On the other side stands nature as the object to be mastered. As the "middle link" there is "the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process,"50 nature turned against itself through the ingenuity of "man." Previously objectified nature becomes the instrument through which living, growing, developing nature is reduced to a lifeless system of objects. Nature becomes its own gravedigger.

Paradoxically, this mechanized nature becomes more "organic" to "man" than the living whole of nature can ever be. Thus, "machines, ... locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules, etc." are "natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature" and "organs of the human brain, created by the human hand," in which "the power of knowledge" is "objectified."51 Indeed, no organism has ever evolved an organ more suitably adapted to its telos, for in Marx's problematic of

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48 Ibid., p. 410. It is unconvincing and undialectical to interpret this passage as being merely a negative criticism of capitalism. Marx's point is that despite capitalist abuses there is a true *Aufhebung* present in which disenchantment and objectification will be preserved and developed in higher social formations rather than being annulled.

49 Ibid., p. 325.

50 Ibid., p. 705.

51 Ibid., p. 706.
human emancipation, the end of humanity, the full unfolding of powers and the development of needs can only be attained through success in the project of the mastery of nature.

Marx’s conception of human action on nature perpetuates certain dualisms going back in Western thought to the Greeks. Carol Gould has perceptively commented on the analogy between Marx’s view of the nature of form in natural and in made objects and that presented by Aristotle.\(^\text{52}\) In the \textit{Grundrisse}, Marx comments that in the made object “there is an indifference on the part of the substance (\textit{Stoff}) towards the form,” whereas in the natural object there is an “immanent law of reproduction” that “maintains its form.”\(^\text{53}\) While this conception fails to recognize the real contribution of nature to the forms of made objects, it exhibits a recognition of teleology in nature. Nevertheless, Marx does not develop this teleological conception, which might have enabled him to see emergent subjectivity, developing freedom, and intrinsic value in nature. Instead, what prevails in his thought is another neo-Aristotelian line of analysis which leads in a radically anthropocentric direction.

The prevailing tendency in Marx’s analysis is to ignore the significance of form in nature and to reduce nature to a source of unqualified matter which must be formed and given value through the instrumental activities of “man.” It is mere raw material, \textit{materia prima}, lacking actuality, to be given form and value through human \textit{techne}. “Man” recreates nature in his own image, as an extension of himself. Thus, nature appears as “the pre-existing arsenal of all objects of labor,”\(^\text{54}\) “the automatic system of machinery” serves as the means to “transmit the worker’s activity to the object” or “on to the raw material,”\(^\text{55}\) and ultimately, as he formulated it as early as the \textit{Paris Manuscripts}, “all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become his objects: that is, man himself becomes the object.”\(^\text{56}\)

The limit of “man’s” conquest of nature is therefore his annihilation of it as (to adapt a useful term) a significant Other. It is pure Other, the field for dominating self-assertation, through which human power alone is signified.

OEDIPAL MAN

Marx’s claim that “man” must annihilate external nature as a determining force betrays his underlying hostility to nature as a limiting maternal power. In

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\(^\text{56}\) Marx, \textit{Economic and Philesophic Manuscripts}, p. 95.
he discusses the disastrous effects on “man” of nature as nurturing mother. “Where Nature is too lavish, she ‘keeps him in hand, like a child in leading-strings.’ She does not impose upon him any necessity to develop himself.”

Primitive “man” suffers from a “narrowness” in social relationships because he “has not yet severed the umbilical cord” that ties him to the maternal tribal body and the maternal body of the Earth. Primitive man, in what Marx sees as the infancy of the race (for even the Greeks had only reached “the historic childhood of humanity”!), remains helplessly dependent until the organic ties with the maternal body are sundered.

In order to achieve independence, “man” must successfully pass through a kind of Oedipal stage in which his infantile maternal attachments are overcome and he attains the power of a self-determining being. It can never, therefore, be nature as benevolent, nurturing mother, only nature as a more demanding, phallic power, that can enable “man” to become such an independent and powerful being. Since God, the patriarchal father, is dead, nature herself must take on the paternal role in the world-historical familial drama.

Fortunately, the “stingy,” “paltry” nature of certain climes has precisely the correct paternal qualities. In such places, nature, playing the role of the severe and demanding patriarch, imposes on “man” the necessity to rely on his own resources and to develop the capacity to rebel successfully against nature’s domination. Indeed, in Capital Marx cites in support of his views a passage in which nature is portrayed as the judicious father who grants the adolescent son only the most meager material assistance so as to force the latter to become independent and self-reliant: “The earth’s spontaneous productions being in small quantity, and quite independent of man, appear, as it were, to be furnished by Nature, in the same way as a small sum is given to a young man, in order to put him in a way of industry, and of making his fortune.”

Nature thus gives “man” the opportunity to prove his manhood, to demonstrate his own powers.

In this way, “man” successfully breaks his self-limiting bonds of dependency on maternal nature and takes advantage of the challenges offered him by nature in the guise of surrogate patriarch. Once he has established his independence (or the illusion of independence, which will suffice), the maternal and paternal roles of nature are seemingly surpassed. Nature (and, of course, we are referring always to that “external” nature that “man” confronts in transformative praxis) becomes a pure negative, an Other necessary only as the object through which he develops and expresses his power. The mechanistic and instrumentalist images of nature favored by Marx—nature as “larder” and “tool house,” for example—

58 Ibid., 1:79.
59 Ibid., 1:178.
illustrate most adequately his conception of its significance for fully mature "man." 60

This is not to say that the nature that is finally "mastered" in the project of technological domination has lost for Marx all aspects of the maternal and the feminine. The significance to Marx of the inevitable return to nature as all-embracing mother is reflected in the extent to which this theme is systematically suppressed in his thought. Nature must retain an underlying femininity, given Marx's traditionalist conceptions of gender. In achieving maturity and "mastery," "man" has attained what Marx describes as his favorite masculine virtue, strength, while nature comes to manifest eminently his preferred feminine virtue, weakness. 61 The domination of nature signifies in an important sense the domination of the masculine over the feminine—whatever we are promised regarding the eventual emancipation of woman as worker or even as human being.

CONCLUSION: THE SIRENS ALL SINK DOWN

Marx's vision of nature is then far from ecological. The ecological world view comprehends nature as a whole, as a unity in diversity in which the development of each being is an inseparable part of a larger system of development and unfolding of value. 62 Marx's hopes for an end to the opposition between nature and history, his recognition of the teleological nature of phenomena, and his dialectical methodology with its emphasis on development, internal relations, and organic wholes do point the way toward a truly ecological dialectic. 63 Yet, in his anthropocentrism, his instrumentalist view of nature, and in his problematic of liberation through technological domination he fails to overcome the fatal nonecological dualisms of the Western tradition. In the end, he succeeds only in founding them more securely in an ideology of humanism, enlightened rationality, and revolutionary transformation that speak more coherently to the pre-ecological modern age.

60 ibid., 1:179.
61 Karl Marx, The Essential Writings, ed. Frederic Bender (Boulder: Westview Press, 1972), p. vii. These were Marx's answers to questions in a popular game called "Confessions." He also appropriately identified his idea of happiness as "to fight" and his idea of misery as "submission." It is not without grounds that critics like Baudrillard and Axelos have found in this serious revolutionary the absence of a notion of play. Engels' answers to the latter two questions were "Chateau Margaux 1848" and "having to go to the dentist." See "Misery and Philosophy: Marx in his Family," in Jerrold Seigel, Marx's Fate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), chap. 9, for the context.
Marx’s Promethean and Oedipal “man” is a being who is not at home in nature, who does not see the Earth as the “household” of ecology. He is an indomitable spirit who must subjugate nature in his quest for self-realization. The young Marx describes such a spirit in an early poem:

I am caught in endless strife,  
Endless ferment, endless dream,  
I cannot conform to Life.  
Will not travel with the stream.64

For such a being, the forces of nature, whether in the form of his own unmastered internal nature or the menacing powers of external nature, must be subdued. He, like Homer’s paradigmatic civilized man, Odysseus, must, through repression and domination, vanquish the Sirens. As Marx sums it up in another of his early poetical works:

The Sirens all sink down  
Before his blazing frown  
In weeping springs of light.  
They seek to follow him.  
But ah, the Flood so grim  
Engulfs them all from sight.65

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65 Ibid., 1:545.