

Gold, G and Harris, S. R. (2010) Review of Paul Burkett, *Marxism and ecological economics*. In the Marx & Philosophy Review of Books (June 2010). URL: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2010/147>

Paul Burkett, *Marxism and ecological economics, toward a red and green political economy*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2009. 332pp., \$28.00 pb, ISBN 9781608460250

Reviewed by: Gerry Gold and Steven Harris

This paperback edition of Paul Burkett's valiant but flawed attempt (originally published in 2005) to persuade academics of the value of Marx and Marxism to the newly integrated discipline of ecological economics deserves a broad measure of attention, applause and support.

Rooting itself in Marx's critique of the physiocrats, the book includes a systematic dissection and demolition of the many flavours and varieties of attempts by the high and low priests of capitalist economics to incorporate ecological thinking into their benighted paradigm, as one by one the proponents of Natural Capital try to put a price on Nature.

Burkett provides more than just an overview of economics for ecologists and an introduction to ecology for economists. The timely republication of his penetrating critique provides material needed, for example, to understand and rebut the report of the work of Pavan Sukdev's group on The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity. This is scheduled for June 2010, in advance of the global Convention on Biological Diversity in Japan, during the International Year of Biodiversity.

Using and displaying the wealth of his knowledge of Marx and Engels' profound understanding of, and writings about the capitalist exploitation of Nature and its necessarily destructive impacts - encapsulated in their concept of 'the metabolic rift', Burkett does much to correct the uninformed beliefs concerning the significance of their work. He clearly distinguishes between those he criticises for their assumption, acceptance and advocacy of 'money, capital and the market as permanent social forms of human and natural wealth', contrasting it with Marx and Engels' recognition of the 'historically specific, limited character of capitalism'.

But it is precisely this historical specificity that Burkett's own method of analysis lacks. His academic abstract approach confronts theory with theory, which is not a bad thing in itself. It certainly enables the reader to learn a lot about the work and influence of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Herman Daly, key figures who introduced the second law of thermodynamics to economic thinking.

Importantly, Burkett tackles head-on Daly's influential model of the 'steady-state economy'. This is essentially a version of the current market economy constrained by scientifically-determined limits on population growth and resource throughput. Burkett demonstrates how such idealistic models of 'capitalism as if people and planet mattered' fail to fully acknowledge that the

Gold, G and Harris, S. R. (2010) Review of Paul Burkett, *Marxism and ecological economics*. In the Marx & Philosophy Review of Books (June 2010). URL: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2010/147>

ecological unsustainability of the globalised economy is not only a problem of scale but also of the mechanisms of market valuation through which resources are allocated.

Yes, individual firms may economise on the use of non-renewable resources as their price rises on the market – but this also drives them to seek more efficient ways of using more of those resources, and to find additional sources to use. This is the famous 'Jevons Paradox' – also known as a rebound effect – whereby greater efficiency gives rise to greater consumption as long as there is profit to be made in a competitive market.

In attempting to deal with this paradox, ecological economists such as Daly typically turn away from economics altogether, blaming the materialistic values of consumer society and calling for a change in values as a prerequisite for the emergence of a planet-friendly version of capitalism. As Burkett shows, this line of argument puts the onus on individual consumers rather than producers, and conveniently sidesteps a very inconvenient truth – that the competitive pursuit of profit will always lead to a system that produces ever greater amounts of goods and pollution while consuming ever-increasing quantities of energy and raw materials. As Burkett makes abundantly clear, without growth, there is no capitalism.

Readers who stay the far from easy course of the arguments in this book will also learn much about other aspects of current thinking in ecological economics, including the impact of resource depletion on Sraffian price theory.

Burkett takes an even-handed approach to a range of writers claiming an allegiance to Marx, but, though he acknowledges the significance of 'Marxist historiography', the concrete historical specificity of the impact of capitalist production on the Earth's ecosystems – the immediate, life-threatening consequences of growth-chasing globalising corporations – is missing.

Apart from a two-line reference on the very last page to the 'growing worldwide rebellion against dominant economic institutions (transnational corporations, the IMF-World Bank, and WTO)' there's hardly a mention of the interacting financial, economic, ecological social and political crises that have engulfed the world resulting from three decades of profit-chasing capitalist growth.

Neither is there an attempt to trace their impact on the historical development of the theory needed to understand and intervene. But these concrete historical events surely are the material impetus for the attempted unification of the two disciplines. To ignore them, cut them out of the story, does no service to the cause of Marxism.

Though revolutionary in intent, Burkett's dry, painstaking treatment found this reviewer struggling to complete the course. He is good at quoting Marx and

Gold, G and Harris, S. R. (2010) Review of Paul Burkett, *Marxism and ecological economics*. In the Marx & Philosophy Review of Books (June 2010). URL: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2010/147>

Engels, bringing together and summarising their writing on the subject, but less good at developing their method as a living guide to practice, to converting the world to 'a form of production diametrically opposed to the production of commodities'. Readers looking for an easier entry point would do well to start with *Marx's Ecology* and *Ecology against Capitalism*, the work of John Bellamy Foster.

Though the book stands in the same trench, it is in the sharpest of contrasts with the immediacy, passion and popular appeal of the **Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth** issued by the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, in Bolivia in April 2010. This was organised by the Bolivian government following President Evo Morales' intervention in the failed 2009 Copenhagen meeting in which he summed up the argument as clearly as anyone could want:

"The real cause of climate change is the capitalist system. If we want to save the earth then we must end that economic model. Capitalism wants to address climate change with carbon markets. We denounce those markets and the countries which [promote them]. It's time to stop making money from the disgrace that they have perpetrated."

Despite its faults this book remains a valuable contribution to the most urgent questions of the day, even five years after its first publication.

Science tells us that we're living in a planetary emergency. Let's hope that the transition to a society in which, in Marx's words, 'the earth ceases to be an object of huckstering' can be achieved much more quickly than the open-ended period of drawn-out struggles Burkett promises us.

Gerry Gold is economics editor of A World to Win,
gerry.gold@aworldtowin.net

Dr Steven Harris is Senior lecturer at the University of Glamorgan where he manages Science Shop Wales
srharris@glam.ac.uk