

# Eco-Marxism and Prometheus Unbound

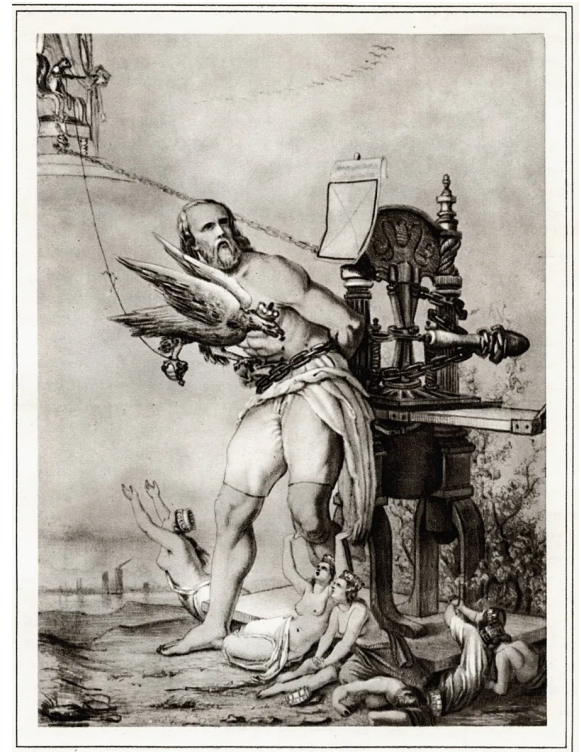
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In the West, ecological modernisation as a model for addressing environmental problems has long been the subject of critique by ecosocialists and by radical ecologists in general. In contrast, in China, ecological modernism as a way of redressing environmental problems has the strong backing of ecological Marxists. The primary reason for these differing approaches should be obvious. In the West, the notion of ecological modernisation, while unobjectionable in itself as part of a comprehensive process of environmental change, has come to stand ideologically for the restrictive model of capitalist ecological modernisation. Here it is suggested that environmental problems can

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be addressed by technological means alone within the established social relations of capitalism in a purely reformist context. Distinct from this, socialist ecological modernisation, as envisioned in China and in a few other postrevolutionary states, is substantively different. It requires a break with the social relations of capital accumulation, facilitating changes in the human relation to nature that are of a revolutionary character, aimed at the creation of an ecological civilisation geared to sustainable human development.

A parallel problem arises with respect to the notion of “Prometheanism,” an ambiguous term ostensibly based on the ancient Greek myth in which Prometheus, a Titan, gave fire to humanity. In the contemporary capitalist view, the Promethean myth has been transformed in such a way that it is seen as standing for technology and power, even for



industrial revolutions.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the original Greek myth as presented by Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound* and later adopted by Enlightenment thinkers, including Percy Bysshe Shelley and Karl Marx, Prometheus, chained to a rock by Hephaestus on the command of Zeus, stood for the revolutionary defiance of the gods, and was the source of human enlightenment and self-consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Capitalist Prometheanism therefore is not the same as revolutionary humanist Prometheanism. The former is about technology and power and has little relation to the Greek myth itself; the latter is about revolutionary enlightenment, the development of social individuals, and the human accord with nature.

In the ruling capitalist ideology of the West/Global North, the issue of the impact of the capital accumulation process on the environment, including the Earth System crisis itself, is either avoided altogether or is seen as subject to pure technological solutions, with no need to alter class, property, capital, and consumption relations. Ecological modernisation as a theory and a practice has thus come to stand principally for an anti-ecological stance in that it puts capitalist social relations before issues of humanity and nature, insisting that nothing needs to change but the machines, while the accumulation of capital remains the supreme object of the system. It is ecological modernisation in this narrow ecotechnic sense that is meant when mention is made of the “greening of capitalism.” In its absolute rejection of ecological limits to unrestrained accumulation, capitalist ecological modernisation is a manifestation of a fatal incapacity to address the needs of humanity and nature.

Within Chinese ecological Marxism, in contrast, ecological modernisation is not about preserving capitalism and opposing environmentalism. Instead, it is conceived as socialist ecological modernisation, part of the process of creating a new ecological civilisation. This does not mean that the ecological contradictions of development and modernity magically disappear. But the task here is viewed differently, aimed at explicitly building a more environmental consciousness and reality. As Xi Jinping says, “clear waters and green mountains” are worth as much or more than “mountains of gold,” and ultimately this means that choices have to be made to sustain the former, even at the expense of the latter.<sup>3</sup>

## Ecosocialism and the Promethean Myth

What makes it so difficult to disentangle the ecological debate in the West is that the alienated, dualistic consciousness that has historically characterised the hegemonic ideology has penetrated the ecosocialist movement itself. This has generated all sorts of contradictions, arising not simply out of capitalism but also emanating from the legacy of the Cold War and its antisocialist ideology. Western Marxism often played an ambiguous role in the Cold War, critical of both capitalism and state socialism, while falling prey to the four retreats (from materialism, the dialectics of nature, class, and imperialism).<sup>4</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that the rise of ecosocialism as a defining concept in the 1980s was closely tied to Cold War ideology. Leading ecosocialists of the period, such as Ted Benton in England and John P. Clark in the United States, took the position that Marx’s work and that of Marxism generally was “Promethean” in the hyperindustrialist

<sup>1</sup> ↪ When “Prometheanism” is criticised by ecosocialists in the West, what is invariably meant is mechanistic Prometheanism, a product of Cold War modernist and ecomodernist ideology, having no direct relationship to the ancient Prometheus myth, which was not about industrialisation.

<sup>2</sup> ↪ Aesch., PV, 965–75; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 1, 29–31; John Bellamy Foster, “Marx and the Environment,” *Monthly Review* 47, no. 3 (July–August 1995), 108–23; Walt Sheasby, “Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: The Real and the Myth in Green Theory,” *Organization and Environment* 12, no. 1 (March 1999): 5–44.

<sup>3</sup> ↪ Xi Jinping, quoted in “Green Waters and Green Mountains,” China Media Project, April 16, 2021, chinamediaproject.org; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 419–20; Chen Yiwen, “The Dialectics of Ecology and Ecological Civilisation,” *Jus Semper*, August 2025; Xi Jinping, *Selected Readings From the Works of Xi Jinping*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2024), 51.

<sup>4</sup> ↪ It should be noted that some Marxists have employed the notion of Prometheanism in relation to Marx in the original sense of humanism, enlightenment, and creativity, rather than standing for instrumentalism and hyperindustrialism as in Cold War ideology. See, for example, Hal Draper, “The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels,” *The Socialist Register* (London: Merlin, 1971), 81–109.

sense and thus opposed to ecology. For Benton, writing in *New Left Review*, Marx stood accused of having a mechanistic “Promethean, ‘productivist’ view of history” that militated against an environmental perspective.<sup>5</sup>

For Marx, Epicurus was “the true radical Enlightener of antiquity.”<sup>6</sup> In his praise of Epicurus in his dissertation, Marx compared him to Prometheus (as depicted by Aeschylus)—the revolutionary Titan who had defied the gods of Olympus by bringing fire—standing for light and knowledge—to humanity, and who was punished by being chained to a rock for eternity on the orders of Zeus.<sup>7</sup> Here Marx replicated Lucretius’s famous eulogy to Epicurus in *De rerum natura*, which had formed the basis for Voltaire’s use of the term “Enlightenment” in eighteenth-century France.<sup>8</sup> This, and a contemporary lithograph on the censorship of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, of which Marx was editor, depicting Prometheus chained to a printing press, engendered the common identification of Marx with Prometheus.<sup>9</sup>

Breaking with the dominant millennia-long conception of Prometheus as a bringer of light/Enlightenment—though Joseph Pierre-Proudhon in the nineteenth century had promoted a mechanical Prometheism and Mary Shelley had referred to “The Modern Prometheus” in the subtitle to her *Frankenstein*—Cold War warriors in the West, many of them disaffected leftists writing for CIA-funded publications like *Encounter*, began presenting Marx as an advocate of extreme Prometheism.<sup>10</sup> This was a code name for the advocacy of unlimited instrumentalism, as the chief aim of society, used to identify Marx with Russia under Joseph Stalin, with its rapid industrialisation and seeming emphasis on gigantism. Biography after biography of Marx touted his reference to Prometheus in his dissertation, with no attempt to explain the context—that is, his praise of Epicurus as a Prometheus-like figure in the sense of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. Epicurus was known for being the leading materialist philosopher of the ancient Greek world and for his humanistic commitment to a self-conscious sustainable community, all of which led Marx to compare him to the Prometheus of myth, none of which had anything to do with instrumentalism, hyperindustrialism, or gigantism.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, in his famous 1918 biography of Marx, Franz Mehring had characterised Marx as a “second Prometheus both in struggle and in suffering.”<sup>12</sup> This was adopted and distorted early on by critics of Marx. In *To the Finland Station* (1940), Edmund Wilson presented Marx as a mechanistic Prometheus with production as his only object, behind whom stood the ominous shadow of Lucifer.<sup>13</sup> One of the earliest and most influential Cold War works to portray Marx as a Promethean instrumentalist was Robert C. Tucker’s *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (1961), which saw both G. W. F. Hegel and Marx as promoting philosophies “whose very own confession was that of Prometheus.”<sup>14</sup> This general view was taken over by Cold Warriors like Lewis Feuer in *Marx and the Intellectuals* (1969) and Daniel Bell in his *The Cultural*

<sup>5</sup> ↪ Ted Benton, “Marxism and Natural Limits,” *New Left Review* 178 (November–December 1989), 82; John P. Clark, “Marx’s Inorganic Body,” *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 258.

<sup>6</sup> ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 141.

<sup>7</sup> ↪ Marx read Aeschylus every year in the original in Greek and listed him as his favourite ancient poet. This had to do not only with *Prometheus Bound* but also with the young Marx’s fascination with Epicurus, whom he compared to Prometheus. Karl Marx, “Confessions,” in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 140; Paul Lafargue, “Reminiscences of Marx,” in *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels*, ed. Institute of Marxism-Leninism (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, no date), 74.

<sup>8</sup> ↪ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), vol. 1, 102–3.

<sup>9</sup> ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 30–31, 374–75. Although the editors of the *Collected Works* correctly say that the image is meant to be Prometheus tied to the printing press, there has been a tendency for some interpreters to see it as an image of a bearded Marx as Prometheus, since he at the time was editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*.

<sup>10</sup> ↪ Marx was a strong critic of Proudhon’s introduction of a mechanistic Prometheism. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 126–33. On the CIA-funded left publications, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> ↪ John Bellamy Foster, *Breaking the Bonds of Fate: Epicurus and Marx* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2025), 52–63.

<sup>12</sup> ↪ Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 31.

<sup>13</sup> ↪ Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1940), 111–19.

<sup>14</sup> ↪ Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 77–78, 81.



Contradictions of Capitalism (1976), with the former accusing Marx of a Promethean “mythopoeic compulsion” devoted to technological absolutism.<sup>15</sup>

Cold War propagandists who attacked Marx and Marxism for its so-called mechanistic Prometheanism were mainly concerned with presenting Marxism as antihumanist, instrumentalist, and hyperindustrialist, in line with their conception of Soviet Communism. Yet, true to their capitalist vision, such critics of Marxism were neither enemies of productivism nor on the side of the environment. Thus, Bell, in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, was one of the chief critics of the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* study (1972). He argued that ecological limits to growth simply did not exist and that resource scarcity was impossible in the new postindustrial world.<sup>16</sup>

Although Cold War criticism of classical Marxism for its supposed mechanistic Prometheanism was thus originally aimed at claiming that Marxism was inherently antihumanistic, this was to metamorphose into the charge that historical materialism was anti-environmentalist through the work of figures like British sociologist Anthony Giddens, who contended in 1981 in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* that Marx had a “Promethean attitude” in which nature was reduced to instrumental terms.<sup>17</sup> This was seconded by a number of prominent ecosocialists, who claimed that Marx was a “Promethean” productivist, and thus an anti-environmentalist, thinker.<sup>18</sup> What is now commonly referred to as first-stage ecosocialism, in the 1980s and ’90s, thus came to stand mainly for a view that represented a break with classical Marxism on environmental grounds, often comparing Marx unfavourably to Thomas Malthus and modern neo-Malthusianism in this respect.<sup>19</sup>

In the late 1990s, however, a second-stage ecological Marxism emerged, beginning with the work of the present author and Paul Burkett. Here the object was to uncover Marx’s own ecological critique, while countering charges that Marx had advocated a so-called hyperindustrialist “Prometheanism.”<sup>20</sup> Emphasis was placed on Marx’s ecological critique of capitalism in his theory of metabolic rift and his conception of sustainable human development.<sup>21</sup> This led to the rapid development of Marxian ecology or of second-stage ecosocialism, fully integrated with the critique of capitalism as a whole and with Marxian dialectics. A very substantial body of work, consisting of hundreds and hundreds of books and articles, has been published, utilising the general metabolic rift analysis arising from Marx’s ecological critique of capitalism to address nearly every aspect of the modern planetary ecological crisis, historically and in the present.<sup>22</sup>

Marx and ecological Marxism can be accurately viewed as Promethean only in the sense of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus itself, as described, in particular, in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, as this had been understood for millennia. Marx depicted Epicurus via Prometheus as a protorevolutionary figure who brought Enlightenment to

<sup>15</sup> ↪ Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), 9–10, 29; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976, 1996), 160.

<sup>16</sup> ↪ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 463–66.

<sup>17</sup> ↪ Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 59–60.

<sup>18</sup> ↪ Even many of those who remained sympathetic to historical materialism in this period saw Marx as lapsing into a crude instrumentalisation of nature. See Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> ↪ John Bellamy Foster, foreword to Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1999), viii–x.

<sup>20</sup> ↪ Foster, “Marx and the Environment”; Burkett, *Marx and Nature*.

<sup>21</sup> ↪ Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 141–77; Paul Burkett, “Marx’s Vision of Sustainable Human Development,” *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (October 2005): 34–62.

<sup>22</sup> ↪ See John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 3–4, 10–11; “*The Metabolic Rift: A Selected Bibliography*,” MR Online, October 16, 2013.

antiquity while defying the whole “pack of gods.”<sup>23</sup> It was in this very same spirit that Rachel Carson, in the modern environmental movement, was to defy what she called “the gods of profit and production.”<sup>24</sup>

## Capitalist Ecological Modernisation as Ideology

If numerous first-stage ecosocialists in the 1980s accused Marx and Frederick Engels of mechanistic Prometheism or hyperindustrialism, and thus branded historical materialism as productivist and anti-ecological, the reality was that many of the most radical struggles over the environment from the 1950s on were led or inspired by socialist ecologists, including figures like Scott Nearing, Barry Commoner, Virginia Brodine, Shigeto Tsuru, K. William Kapp, Raymond Williams, Charles H. Anderson, Murray Bookchin, Allan Schnaiberg, Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, Nancy Krieger, and Rudolf Bahro. In the 1970s, socialist ecology was already a potent force at the movement level, particularly in the United States. Socialist environmentalists were particularly noteworthy for their rejection of neo-Malthusianism, or the notion that ecological problems could be traced principally to population rather than the system of production.

The broad socialist ecological critique was heavily influenced by Marx’s historical materialism and Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature*. It arose first in the natural sciences, beginning in the 1950s, in response to nuclear weapons testing, in the work of critical scientists like Commoner, and gained further impetus in the United States in the late 1960s and early ’70s, in response to a host of problems, manifested in *Science for the People* (both the publication and the organisation).<sup>25</sup>

Within the social sciences, radical and Marxist ecological analysis predominated in the Environmental Sociology section of the American Sociological Association (ASA), which first emerged in the early 1970s.<sup>26</sup> Among the leading figures in environmental sociology were radicals William Catton, author of *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (1982), and Riley Dunlap, who, in the context of the limits to growth debate being waged then mainly by economists, introduced (together with Catton) the distinction between the human exemptionalist paradigm and the new ecological paradigm. The human exemptionalist paradigm, as critically defined by Catton and Dunlap, stood for the hegemonic perspective of capitalist modernity. It was the view that humanity was largely exempt from natural constraints, and that there were ultimately no natural or ecological limits to human advance, which was seen as reliant simply on human ingenuity and technology.<sup>27</sup>

The foremost representatives of human exemptionalism in the debates over the limits to growth in the 1970s and ’80s were resource economist Julian Simon, author of *The Ultimate Resource*, and economic growth theorist Robert Solow, winner of the (so-called) Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Simon, denying all ecological constraints on capital accumulation, pronounced that “there is no meaningful physical limit [or limits]...to our capacity to keep growing [the economy] forever” within the earth environment.<sup>28</sup> Solow wrote: “If it is very easy to substitute other factors for natural resources, then there is in principle no ‘problem.’ The world can, in effect, get along without natural

<sup>23</sup> ↪ Aesch, PV, 975; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 30.

<sup>24</sup> ↪ Rachel Carson, *Lost Woods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 210.

<sup>25</sup> ↪ See John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 502–26.

<sup>26</sup> ↪ Riley E. Dunlap, “A Brief History of the Environment and Technology Section,” *Environment, Technology, and Society*, ASA Section Newsletter, no. 100 (Winter 2001): 1, 4–5, [envirosoc.org/Newsletters/Winter2001.pdf](http://envirosoc.org/Newsletters/Winter2001.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> ↪ William R. Catton, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); William R. Catton and Riley E. Dunlap, “Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm,” *American Sociologist* 13, no. 1 (1978), 41–49; Riley E. Dunlap and William R. Catton, “Struggling with Human Exemptionalism: The Rise, Decline, and Revitalisation of Environmental Sociology,” *American Sociologist* 25 (1994): 5–30.

<sup>28</sup> ↪ Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 346.

resources, so exhaustion is just an event, not a catastrophe.”<sup>29</sup> It was this dominant exemptionalist paradigm that had been challenged by Limits to Growth, which pointed to growing environmental (mainly resource) constraints as the world economy expanded and passed critical thresholds—a perspective that was later extended to address both the problem of increased natural resource constraints or the “tap” and the problem of overflowing ecological wastes or the “sink.”<sup>30</sup>

The new ecological paradigm was closely linked to the limits to growth perspective, and thus represented a frontal attack on the human exemptionalist paradigm. It formed the initial common ground of the Section on Environmental Sociology of the ASA. Originally articulated by Catton and Dunlap, it was later codified in terms of five tenets: (1) limits to growth, (2) non-anthropocentrism, (3) fragility of nature’s “balance,” (4) untenability of human exemptionalism, and (5) ecological crisis.<sup>31</sup> While the new ecological paradigm was in many ways the starting point, this came to be integrated by the late 1970s and early ‘80s in the Environmental Sociology Section of the ASA, with Marxist critiques of monopoly capitalism, the treadmill of production/accumulation, and ecological waste, which joined in the critique of the human exemptionalist paradigm. Theoretically, environmental sociology in the United States prior to the second decade of the present century was dominated by the Marxian critique of capitalism and its ecological degradation. This included not only those, like Schnaiberg, who subscribed to the treadmill of production framework, but also those associated with second-stage ecosocialism, many of whom were identified with the Environmental Sociology Section of the ASA.<sup>32</sup>

However, the strong critique of capitalism that formed the basis of the Environmental Sociology Section of the ASA began to break down in 2003. In October–November 2003, a conference was organised at the University of Wisconsin in honor of Schnaiberg and the treadmill of production perspective, constituting a neo-Marxist tradition central to U.S. environmental sociology that depicted the conflict between capitalism’s accumulation tendencies and the environment. Yet, the conference as it turned out had a dual agenda, since Dutch ecomodernists Arthur P. J. Mol and Gert Spaargaren were also invited.<sup>33</sup> These thinkers set about criticising neo-Marxist approaches to the environment and defending capitalism’s ability to solve environmental problems simply by technological means—in effect offering a new, more nuanced human exemptionalism, which had emerged out of the environmental reform movement in Europe. The debate persisted for years. Ecological modernisation—though widely recognised as theoretically and empirically weak compared to radical ecological and ecosocialist analyses—eventually gained considerable prominence due to its greater conformity to the system, with the official prestige and support that this provided. For Mol and Spaargaren, it was necessary to move away from “the ecologically inspired strand of environmental sociology.” The new ecological paradigm was accused of “coquetting with ecology,” representing an unacceptable “hybrid of sociology and ecology.” Mol and Spaargaren contended that there was no “key obstruction” to environmental reform under capitalist relations of production.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> ↪ Robert Solow, “The Economics of Resources or the Resources of Economics,” *American Economic Review* 64, no. 2 (1974): 11. Solow went on to consider the opposite case where substitutability was bounded. But the thrust of his argument was to emphasise very high levels of substitutability. Thus, he referred to “[William] Nordhaus’s notion of the inevitability of a ‘backstop technology,’” in which, “at some fine cost, production can be freed from exhaustible resources altogether”—a view that Solow treated not as absurd, but as somehow much closer to the truth than its opposite.

<sup>30</sup> ↪ Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972); Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, and Jørgen Randers, *Beyond the Limits* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> ↪ On the prominence of radical ecology and neo-Marxian ecology, see Part I of the “Special Issue on the Environment and the Treadmill of Production in Environmental Sociology,” *Organization and Environment* 17, no. 3 (September 2004), and Part II, *Organization and Environment* 18, no. 1 (March 2005).

<sup>32</sup> ↪ Those associated with second-stage ecosocialism include figures such as the present author, Richard York, Brett Clark, and, later, Hannah Holleman.

<sup>33</sup> ↪ Arthur P. J. Mol and Gert Spaargaren, “From Additions and Withdrawals to Environmental Flows: Reframing Debates in the Environmental Social Sciences,” *Organization and Environment* 18, no. 1 (March 2005): 91–107.

<sup>34</sup> ↪ Gert Spaargaren and Arthur P. J. Mol, “Sociology, Environment, and Modernity,” *Society and Natural Resources* 5 (1992): 325–26; Gert Spaargaren, *The Ecological Modernization of Production and Consumption*, doctoral dissertation, University of Wageningen, Netherlands, 1997, 65–66, edepot.wur.nl/138382; Arthur P. J. Mol and Gert Spaargaren, “Ecological Modernisation Theory in Debate: A Review,” *Environmental Politics* 9 (2000): 22–23.

At their best, capitalist ecological modernists advanced the notion that technology and markets could meet environmental challenges within the capitalist system through mild, light-green reforms without changes in social relations; at their worst, they denied all need for radical ecological strategies and movements. In 2010, Mol, the leading representative of ecological modernisation theory, was given the Distinguished Contribution (or lifetime) Award from the Environmental Sociology Section of the ASA, indicating that ecological modernisation theory, despite its opposition to the radical ecological critique, and its general anti-environmentalist stance, was now considered within the proper purview of the discipline. This reflected a general growth of anti-environmentalism, with the percentage of Americans who considered themselves environmentalists dropping from 76 percent in 1989 to 41 percent in 2021.<sup>35</sup>

Academic ecological modernisation theory had its roots in Cold War modernisation theory. In attacking the red-green theories of thinkers like Bahro and Commoner, Spaargaren argued that they were wrongly opposed to the “industrial society theory” developed by “Daniel Bell and others,” celebrating capitalist modernisation and industrialisation. Modernisation, in this sense, was associated with conservative sociologist Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism, and even more with a conception that identified modernity with the West, which was characterised as constituting the “universal” culture in the Weberian sense.<sup>36</sup> As leading Cold War sociologist and anti-Marxist Edward Shils argued, modernisation meant the West. In his own words, “‘Modern’ means being western without the onus of following the West. The model of modernity is a picture of the West detached in some way from its geographical origins and locus.”<sup>37</sup> Naturally, “the West” in this sense also stood for capitalism, which was seen as uniquely Western.

Western ecological modernisation theory is thus procapitalist and Eurocentric. Nevertheless, a key proposition of both Spaargaren and Mol was that ecological modernisation is entirely independent of social and economic relations. As Mol put it, “the ideology of ecological modernisation” consisted of the view that “an environmentally sound society” could be created without reference to “a variety of other social criteria and goals such as the scale of production, the capitalistic mode of production, workers’ influence, equal allocation of economic goods, gender criteria, and so on. Including the latter set of criteria might result in a more radical programme (in the sense of moving further away from the present social order), but not necessarily a more ecological radical programme.”<sup>38</sup> The implication was that the advent of socialism would not materially improve matters ecologically. Or, as he wrote elsewhere, “ecological modernisation theorists believe...that the environment can be protected within the logic and rationality of capitalism...‘Green’ capitalism is seen as possible, and in some respects even desirable.” This means “redirecting and transforming ‘free market Capitalism’ in such a way that it less and less obstructs, and increasingly contributes, to the preservation of society’s sustenance base.” More broadly, he stated, ecological modernisation means “the incorporation of nature as a third force of production [after labor and capital] in the capitalist economic process.”<sup>39</sup> For the ecological modernist Maarten Hajer, it was possible to see “ecological modernisation as the perception of nature as a new and essential subsystem” of industrial capitalism.<sup>40</sup> How the entire Earth System could become a “subsystem” of industrial society in spatial and temporal terms was not explained.

<sup>35</sup> ↪ Gallup, “Environment,” [news.gallup.com/poll/1615/environment.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/1615/environment.aspx).

<sup>36</sup> ↪ Spaargaren, *The Ecological Modernisation of Production and Consumption*, 9–11.

<sup>37</sup> ↪ Edward Shils, *Political Development in the New States* (London: Mouton & Co., 1965), 7–10.

<sup>38</sup> ↪ Arthur P. J. Mol, “Ecological Modernisation and Institutional Reflexivity: Environmental Reform in the Late Modern Age,” *Environmental Politics* 5 (1996): 302–23; Spaargaren, *The Ecological Modernisation of Production and Consumption*, 20–22; see also John Bellamy Foster, “The Planetary Rift and the New Human Exemptionalism: A Political-Economic Critique of Ecological Modernisation Theory,” *Organization and Environment* 25, no. 3 (2012): 219–20.

<sup>39</sup> ↪ Arthur P. J. Mol, *The Refinement of Production: Ecological Modernisation Theory and the Chemical Industry* (Utrecht, Netherlands: International Books, 1995), 41–42; Arthur P. J. Mol and Martin Jänicke, “The Origins and Theoretical Foundations of Ecological Modernisation Theory,” in *The Ecological Modernisation Reader*, eds. Arthur P. J. Mol, David Sonnenfeld, and Gert Spaargaren (London: Routledge, 2009), 24.

<sup>40</sup> ↪ Maarten Hajer, “Ecological Modernisation as Cultural Politics,” in *Risk, Environment, and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology*, eds. Scott Lash, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Brian Wynne (London: Sage, 1996), 252.



## Capitalist Ecological Modernisation and the Western Left

In 2007, ecomodernists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, who in 2004 published the essay “The Death of Environmentalism,” brought out their book *Breakthrough: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, launching at the same time the Breakthrough Institute, a procorporate, procapitalist, ecomodernist, and anti-environmentalist think tank.<sup>41</sup> Constituting an attempt to bring ecomodernism into the limelight, the Breakthrough Institute stands for a program of supposedly solving ecological problems via market-based technology, subsidised by the capitalist state, while keeping existing social relations intact. This approach is anti-environmentalist in the sense of rejecting the environmental movement and promoting the myth of the greening of capitalism. In 2015, the Breakthrough Institute initiated *An Ecomodernist Manifesto: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Birth of Ecomodernism*, which argued that the only solution to environmental challenges was “accelerated decoupling” of the economy from the environment by more intensive forms of production requiring “accelerated technological progress.” Although arguing that their approach could not be reduced to the system of capital accumulation or free market conservatism, it went against any changes in existing social relations. The best answer to climate change, the Ecomodernist Manifesto affirmed, was nuclear power, billed as “the only present-day zero-carbon technology with the demonstrated ability to meet most, if not all, of the energy demands of a modern economy.”<sup>42</sup>

In its many accounts of ecomodernism, the Breakthrough Institute presents capitalism as the only pathway to a green solution. In his book *Green Delusions* (1992), attacking radical environmentalism and ecosocialism, Breakthrough senior fellow Martin Lewis advocated a mechanistic “Promethean environmentalism,” which he identified with the human-exemptionalist, “technocratic” approach of Simon in *The Ultimate Resource*.<sup>43</sup> Breakthrough senior fellow Patrick Brown has argued against all logic and evidence that “climate adaptation has been a resounding success in the modern era of rapid capitalistic economic growth.” According to Brown there is “no coherent trend in global floods” or global droughts or global wildfires. The “carbon budget” has not been “breached.” He flatly denies the criticism that capitalism is changing the climate “much faster than we are adapting to it.”<sup>44</sup> Breakthrough Institute senior fellows Nordhaus and Alex Smith, writing for the “democratic socialist” journal *Jacobin*, argue that corporate-style agribusiness is the most efficient way in which to address agriculture ecologically, and is the model for a decoupling ecomodernism.<sup>45</sup>

Ecomodernist strategy is often presented as “progressive” and has increasingly been openly celebrated by liberal and social democratic thinkers as “Promethean” in the hyperindustrialist sense.<sup>46</sup> Here “Prometheanism” as a propagandistic Cold War term introduced to characterise Marxism as a form of instrumentalism and extreme productivism, and, thus, antihumanist—and then later adopted by first-stage ecosocialists to criticise Marx as anti-environmentalist—has been turned into a badge of honour in social democratic circles. Thus, so-called “democratic socialist” ecomodernists Matt Huber and Leigh Phillips, writing for *Jacobin*, proudly present themselves as belonging to a long tradition of mechanistic “‘Promethean’ Marxists.” Consistent with the hegemonic notion that the ecological problem is manageable without fundamental changes in social relations, they reject Marx’s metabolic rift theory. Following Simon’s human

<sup>41</sup> ↪ Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *“The Death of Environmentalism”* (2004); Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> ↪ John Asafu-Adjaye et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, April 2015, ecomodernism.org.

<sup>43</sup> ↪ Martin Lewis, *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), 7, 15.

<sup>44</sup> ↪ Patrick Brown, *“Defending Economic Productivity and Capitalism for Climate Adaptation and Mitigation,”* Breakthrough Institute, September 16, 2024, thebreakthrough.org; Patrick Brown, *“Forget Adapting to Climate Change: We Must First Adapt to the Climate We Have,”* Breakthrough Institute, July 17, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> ↪ Ted Nordhaus and Alex Smith, *“The Problem with Alice Waters and the ‘Slow Food’ Movement,”* *Jacobin*, December 3, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> ↪ See, for example, William B. Meyer, *The Progressive Environmental Prometheans: Left-Wing Heralds of a “Good Anthropocene”* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).



exemptionalism, Huber and Phillips insist that the only truly “insuperable limits” to economic expansion are “the laws of logic and physics.”<sup>47</sup> In Phillip’s words, mimicking Simon’s anti-environmental human exemptionalism, which he praises, “you can have infinite [economic] growth in a finite planet.” He goes on: “The Socialist...must defend economic growth, productivism, [hyperindustrial] Prometheanism.”<sup>48</sup> The planet we are told has a carrying capacity that can support “282 billion” people—or more. “Energy is freedom. Growth is freedom.” The goal of society is “more stuff.”<sup>49</sup>

Economic expansion, in this view, comes first, humanity and the planet last. The ecological program of such thinkers, ostensibly on the left, does not differ materially from that of the neoliberals of the Breakthrough Institute, with whom they are closely aligned.<sup>50</sup>

Huber and Phillips do not entirely ignore social relations. Yet, they refrain from challenging unlimited capital accumulation or infinite exponential economic growth. All that is needed to address climate change, we are told, is “socialist” (that is, social democratic) planning based on organised labour, particularly electrical workers.<sup>51</sup> Huber strongly opposes what he calls the “anti-system environmental radical” and offers as his solution an “anti-carbon democracy.” In line with erstwhile leftist Christian Parenti, he argues that an ecosocialist “revolutionary overthrow of capitalism” is not a viable option on a reasonable timescale. Hence, the strategy adopted must conform to the internal logic of the capitalist system itself. If capitalism were “decarbonised” and the fossil fuel industry were “euthanised” as part of a capitalist Green New Deal, Huber contends, anthropogenic climate change would simply cease to exist and there would be no need for “aggregate reductions in energy consumption” or reductions in capital accumulation, even in the developed capitalist countries.<sup>52</sup> Accumulation of capital could presumably go on as before, reaching ever greater heights, but on a decarbonised basis.

The argument that conceives endless economic growth/accumulation as the driving force in a Green capitalist solution to climate change is tied to the reduction of the Earth System emergency to climate change alone. This is backed up by Huber and Phillips’s remarkable assertion, in defiance of all contemporary Earth System science, that the other eight planetary boundaries represent no obstacle to human advancement.<sup>53</sup> Such planetary boundaries as the loss of biological integrity (including mass species extinction), the rift in the biogeochemical flows (disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles), land-system change (including deforestation), freshwater loss, novel entities (chemical, radionuclide, and plastic pollution), and ocean acidification—all of which natural scientists say have now been crossed—are simply wished out of existence.<sup>54</sup> Democratic socialist (or social democratic) ecomodernism, conceived in this way, “attains adequate expression when, and only when, it becomes a mere figure of speech,” belying any rational relation to ecology.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup> ↪ Matt Huber and Leigh Phillips, “Kohei Saito’s ‘Start from Scratch’ Degrowth Communism,” *Jacobin*, March 9, 2024; Leigh Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts: A Defense of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 217–34. Readers can find their profiles on the Breakthrough Institute website; see *Huber*: [thebreakthrough.org/people/matt-huber](https://thebreakthrough.org/people/matt-huber); *Phillips*: [thebreakthrough.org/people/leigh-phillips](https://thebreakthrough.org/people/leigh-phillips). Phillips frequently contributes articles to the Breakthrough Institute and to the MAGA-hegemonic publication *Compact Magazine*, as well as *Jacobin*.

<sup>48</sup> ↪ Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts*, 59, 255, 259.

<sup>49</sup> ↪ Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts*, 63, 89, 263.

<sup>50</sup> ↪ See the profiles of Huber and Phillips on the Breakthrough Institute website.

<sup>51</sup> ↪ Huber and Phillips, “Kohei Saito’s ‘Start from Scratch’ Degrowth Communism”; Leigh Phillips, “Hurrah for 8 Billion Humans,” *Compact Magazine*, December 2, 2022; Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski, *The People’s Republic of Walmart: How the World’s Biggest Corporations are Laying the Foundation for Socialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> ↪ Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War* (London: Verso, 2022), 159, 201–4.

<sup>53</sup> ↪ Huber and Phillips, “Kohei Saito’s ‘Start from Scratch’ Degrowth Communism”; Phillips, “Hurrah for 8 Billion Humans.”

<sup>54</sup> ↪ Cristen Hemingway Jaynes, “‘Ticking Time Bomb’ of Ocean Acidification Has Already Crossed Planetary Boundary, Threatening Marine Ecosystems Study,” *EcoWatch*, June 9, 2025.

<sup>55</sup> ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 54.

What is clear in all of this is that a socialist approach to the planetary ecological emergency is either revolutionary in scope, or it is a contradiction in terms: at best a strategy of making the current accumulative society work better, while denying the dialectical totality of the Earth System crisis.

It is worth emphasising that there are virtually no ecological thinkers on the left who actually oppose a process of ecological modernisation altogether when conceived as part of a comprehensive strategy of promoting ecological sustainability, including changes in both social relations and productive forces. Ecosocialist opposition rather is directed at capitalist ecological modernisation as a theory and practice that includes such regressive views as: (1) the refusal to recognise that the fundamental ecological problem is related to capitalism and requires revolutionary changes in social relations; (2) the irrational human-exemptionalist postulate that technology—in accord with the so-called “free market” and the “environmental state”—constitutes the total solution to environmental contradictions, irrespective of prevailing social relations; (3) the belief that exclusive reliance on machine technology makes a purely reformist approach to ecological crises possible; and (4) the denial of critical planetary boundaries and critical ecological limits, the crossing of which creates rifts in the biogeochemical cycles of the planet, endangering humanity and innumerable other species.

## China and Socialist Ecological Modernisation

The concept of modernity in bourgeois ideology in the West has always stood for the broad economic, political, and cultural developments of capitalism and the West, often equated with one another. The roots of modernity, for Max Weber, lay in the formal rationality that established “Western civilisation and...Western civilisation only” as the “universal” culture, represented by its science, technology, religion, historical method, music, art, architecture, law, politics, and above all capitalism.<sup>56</sup> In David Landes’s *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (1969), Western capitalism and the Industrial Revolution were simply seen as products of a larger process of modernisation in which the West had excelled.<sup>57</sup> Modernisation, in the Eurocentric conception, ultimately has no meaning other than the domination of nature and of the global periphery via institutions, particularly of a technological and economic nature, supposedly originating (and culminating) in the West.<sup>58</sup> As Latin American thinker Enrique Dussel wrote, “‘Modernity’ [or at least the European conception of modernity] appears when Europe affirms itself as the ‘center’ of a World History that it inaugurates; ‘the periphery’ that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition.”<sup>59</sup> Ecological modernisation is viewed in the Western imperial core of the world system, as simply a further addition to this conception, a technocapitalist, modernist, reformist solution to environmental problems, seen as reflecting another stage of the Western imperial core’s rich maturity. It denies what Marx saw as the metabolic rift inherent in the capitalist accumulation process.<sup>60</sup>

But if in Western ideology it is held that there is only one modernity, based in European culture and capitalism, the actual historical origins of modernity, as a break with more traditional views of the human relation to the world, it can be argued, went much further back, arising in the recognition that humanity was *homo faber*. The view that human beings were capable of changing the world and thus makers of their own history, independently of the “pack of gods,” was never—as Marxist critics of Eurocentrism such as Joseph Needham and Samir Amin declared—a unique innovation

<sup>56</sup> ↪ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1930), 13–17.

<sup>57</sup> ↪ David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>58</sup> ↪ On the concept of the domination of nature and its complexities, see William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

<sup>59</sup> ↪ Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” *boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 65.

<sup>60</sup> ↪ On Marx’s theory of metabolic rift, see John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 41–61; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature: Capitalism and the Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 12–34.

of the Western Enlightenment. Rather it was a product of worldwide cultural development arising during the long Axial Age, in which a similar centring of human self-development could be seen as emerging in many different civilisations.<sup>61</sup> This was evident in Epicurus's materialist philosophy in the Hellenistic world, and in the emergence of Daoism (and Confucianism) in the Warring States period in China. Modernity, viewed in this deeper historical sense, becomes a product of universal civilisation tendencies operating globally with the emergence of human self-consciousness in the Hegelian sense. Socialist, as opposed to capitalist, conceptions of modernity are a product of this more worldwide conception, extending back over millennia, where the object, as in Marx's analysis, is sustainable human development and the full realisation of elemental human needs.

It is here that socialist modernisation, and specifically socialist ecological modernism, has to be considered, particularly in relation to its development in China. China is a 5,000-year-old civilisation, with a strong traditional ecological heritage stemming from Daoism and Confucianism, but that now, under "socialism with Chinese characteristics," is introducing a revolutionary ecological modernism tied to its concept of ecological civilisation that transcends anything envisioned in the West. Socialist ecological modernisation, despite the familiarity of some of its basic forms—for example, the attempt to develop green technology and its concern with economic welfare—is best conceived as the inverse of capitalist ecological modernisation in its underlying logic. As Chen Yiwen wrote in "The Dialectics of Ecology and Ecological Civilisation":

*Modernisation in harmony with nature is part of the overall conception of Chinese modernisation, which means that it requires: (1) prioritising the coordination of the population with the resources and carrying capacity of the environment; (2) ensuring public ownership of natural resources and social sharing of ecological welfare in the process of advancing common prosperity; (3) producing ecological products and cultivating ecological culture in the context of pursuing coordination between material and cultural-ethical advancement; (4) opposing any form of ecological imperialism and extractivism; and (5) promoting the creation of a clean and beautiful world while adhering to the path of peaceful development.*<sup>62</sup>

Nothing could be more opposed to the conception of capitalist ecological modernisation in the West, which has its roots in the expropriation of nature. Ecological modernisation is generally seen in Europe and the United States as an extension of the technological domination of nature aimed at ensuring human exemptionalism. It envisions a world of unlimited capitalist accumulation that by virtue of technology is free from environmental constraints, with the economy simply decoupled from the biogeochemical processes and elemental conditions of the Earth System. In contrast, as Xi explains regarding China's ecological civilisation, "Nature provides the basic conditions for human survival and development. Respecting, adapting to, and protecting nature is essential for building China into a modern socialist country in all respects," one synonymous with ecological civilisation. He writes: "To fundamentally improve our ecosystems, we must abandon the model based on an increase in material resource consumption, extensive development, high energy consumption, and high emissions."<sup>63</sup>

Socialist ecological modernisation, which avoids the delusions of "green capitalism," makes the building of an ecological civilisation a direct object. This is counterposed to capitalist ecomodernism, which is intended to maintain the dominant social relations and the anti-ecological logic of the unrestrained capital-accumulation system, while

<sup>61</sup> ↪ See Joseph Needham, *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 69, 91–93, 106; Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 13, 109, 115, 121, 143–46, 212–13; Foster, *Breaking the Bonds of Fate*, 25–26.

<sup>62</sup> ↪ Chen, "The Dialectics of Ecology and Ecological Civilisation."

<sup>63</sup> ↪ Xi Jinping, *Selected Readings*, vol. 1, 51, 638.

simply attempting to ameliorate some of its worst effects—in the midst of a planetary ecological emergency!—via second-order regulations and new technology. In U.S. monopoly capitalism, for example, the development of solar technology has always been hindered by the threat it poses to the dominant fossil fuel system, and therefore is intended, at best, to supplement the latter. Here ecological modernisation means the continued subordination of environmental to economic goals.<sup>64</sup>

Under its socialist ecological modernisation China has surpassed the West in nearly every category of renewable energy development. In 2023, China accounted for 83 percent of world solar panel production, while the United States accounted for only 2 percent. China's high-speed rail system is larger, faster, and more efficient than that of Europe, and China also accounts for 90 percent of the world bus market. Electric vehicles sales in China now exceed those of internal combustion engines. Within the next three years, according to the Financial Times, China will be obtaining more than half its energy from low-carbon sources, and "is on its way to becoming the world's first 'electrostate,'" with a growing portion of its economy supported by electricity and clean energy. As a result, China's carbon emissions have begun to fall, even with strong economic growth and its continuing heavy, if diminishing, reliance on coal-fired plants. China is the leader in increase in forests globally, with forest coverage nearly doubling since the 1980s.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, it would be a mistake, based on such achievements, to see Chinese ecological modernisation as simply entailing a kind of green productivism, which is the meaning of capitalist ecological modernisation in the West. Rather, socialist ecological modernisation aimed at building an ecological civilisation is, in Xi's words, "the modernisation of harmony between humanity and nature."<sup>66</sup>

Crucial to the Sinicisation of Marxism is the goal of the formation of a "community of life" in all of its dimensions, from ecosystems to human-nature relations to the human metabolism with the Earth System itself. "It is essential to differentiate," Chen has written, socialist ecological modernisation in China "from the notion of 'ecological modernisation' that emerged in Europe in the mid- to late 1980s...prevalent in developed capitalist nations, [which] seeks to enhance gradually environmental quality through economic and technological improvements and public administration adjustments (including the increasing application of market instruments) often without challenging the fundamental tenets of capitalism."<sup>67</sup> Instead, the emphasis of socialist ecological modernisation is on "the socialist reconstruction of social relations alongside a fundamental ecological transformation of humanity's existing methods of production." In this, "the ultimate goal is the realisation of communism, which entails the liberation of both humanity and nature."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> ↪ Daniel M. Berman and John T. O'Connor, *Who Owns the Sun?: People, Politics, and the Struggle for a Solar Economy* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> ↪ Debby Cao, "Why Is China, and Not the US, the Leader in Solar Power?," SolarCtrl, April 24, 2024; Danny Kennedy, "U.S. Petrostate Versus China's Electrostate," Climate and Capital Media, January 23, 2025; Nassos Stylianou et al., "How Xi Sparked China's Electricity Revolution," Financial Times, May 12, 2025; Laurie Myllyvirta, "Clean Energy Just Put China's CO2 Emissions into Reverse for the First Time," Carbon Brief, May 15, 2025; Yaotong Cai et al., "Unveiling Spatiotemporal Tree Cover Patterns in China: The First 30m Annual Tree Cover Mapping from 1985 to 2023," ISPRS Journal of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing 216 (October 2024): 240–58.

<sup>66</sup> ↪ Xi, *Selected Readings*, vol. 1, 23.

<sup>67</sup> ↪ Chen Yiwen, "Marxist Ecology in China: From Marx's Ecology to Socialist Eco-Civilisation Theory," Jus Semper, September 2025.

<sup>68</sup> ↪ Chen, "Marxist Ecology in China."



## Unbound Nature and Humanity

We only have fragments from Aeschylus's lost play *Prometheus Unbound* on Prometheus's liberation from his chains.<sup>69</sup>

Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his own work, *Prometheus Unbound*, written in the early nineteenth century, ends his epic poem with the reunification of Prometheus with nature. Mary Shelley observed in her notes on his poem: "When the benefactor of man is liberated, Nature resumes the beauty of her prime." As ecosocialist Walt Sheasby wrote, "There could scarcely be a more dynamic image of the romantic [revolutionary] celebration of nature and freedom as intertwined."<sup>70</sup>

The Cold War manipulation of the ancient Greek Promethean myth, appropriating out of context Marx's quotation from Aeschylus in the foreword of his dissertation, was a device used to disparage Marxism, characterising it as a philosophy of instrumentalism, extreme productivism, and anti-humanism. What has been called "first-stage ecosocialism" turned the Cold War myth of an instrumentalist, mechanistic Prometheanism supposedly embedded in classical historical materialism, into a charge of anti-environmentalism, while ignoring or downplaying Marx's own ecological critique. Second-stage ecosocialism demonstrated that this characterisation of classical Marxism as a instrumentalist, mechanistic Prometheanism was false in every respect—both with regard to the ancient Greek Promethean myth, and the classical historical-materialist relation to the environment. Meanwhile, capitalist ecological modernisation theory, in its polemic against radical environmentalism and ecological Marxism, was itself openly to embrace an instrumentalist/mechanistic Prometheanism as a symbol of its own outlook. The full irony was evident in the reemergence in social-democratic circles of a supposedly left ecomodernism under the false flag of Promethean Marxism, wrongly claiming that for classical Marxism, the object was simply economic growth, rather than sustainable human development.<sup>71</sup>

The inverted, alienated world of capitalist ecomodernism with its mechanistic "Prometheanism" is a flight from the possibility of socialist ecomodernism and a revolutionary humanist-ecological Prometheanism. Capitalist ecological modernism, with its distorted, mechanistic version of the Prometheus myth, vainly seeks to change the productive forces while keeping existing social relations of accumulation and expropriation of nature intact. In contrast, socialist ecomodernism, or humanist-ecological Prometheanism, as developed in Chinese ecological Marxism today, in line with China's own humanist-environmental traditions, represents a revolutionary stance. Here the object is to change social, productive, and environmental relations in such a way that acquisitive society is abandoned and both nature and humanity are unbound and in mutual accord—as envisioned, in different ways, by such humanistic thinkers as Laozi, Aeschylus, Epicurus, Shelley, and Marx. As Marx states in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, communism is at one and the same time "the perfected unity in essence of man with nature, the true resurrection of nature, the realised naturalism of man and the realised humanism of nature."<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> ↩ Carey Jobe, "[Aeschylus' Prometheus Unbound: Rebuilding a Lost Masterpiece](#)," *Antigone*, February 10, 2024, [antigonejournal.com](#).

<sup>70</sup> ↩ Mary Shelley, "Notes on 'Prometheus Unbound,'" in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914), 268; Sheasby, "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx," 18.

<sup>71</sup> ↩ Huber and Phillips, "Kohei Saito's 'Start from Scratch' Degrowth Communism."

<sup>72</sup> ↩ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 349–50.

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