

## **A Marxist Analysis of Climate Change**

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### **Abstract**

*It is now widely known that environmental problems will be one of the major challenges for humanity in the coming years. If global human generated green house gas emissions are not reduced, there is a huge risk and possibility that some geographically specific cities will be flooded. It will further lead to droughts, floods, shortage of drinking water and diseases. In short, human social behaviour result in environmental problems and their solution lies in societal efforts. Marx urged a social revolution that would abolish private ownership and finally end the capitalist exploitation of the environment. It requires a complete change in our contemporary social order, something as big as revolution. It is not the role of Marxist tendency to develop any technology but it is the responsibility of the societal residents to decide what roles these solutions will play in their lives. Only a socialist society would be able to control the production and halting it so that we can rethink about, analyse and formulate the best solutions for both the earth and its inhabitants. Sociology provides the solution to this. Now when it is clear that capitalist industries, countries or states are the main polluters, all we need is a strong social force more powerful than these corporations.*

### **Introduction**

*“We won’t have a society if we destroy the environment” - Margaret Mead*

Climate change can be defined as “A change in global or regional climate patterns, in particular a change apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards and attributed largely to the increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels by human beings” (Oxford Dictionary, 2005). It is now widely known that environmental problems will be one of the major challenges for humanity in the coming years. According to Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2001, the average atmospheric temperature of earth will rise by  $5.8^{\circ}\text{C}$  by 2100 until carbon dioxide levels are controlled at around twice the pre-industrial level (J Haywood, M Schulz - Geophysical Research Letters, 2007). The level of threat posed by climate change, and the limited time period during which we have to take actions, make this issue the most urgent question of this age. If global human generated green house gas emissions are not reduced, there is a huge risk and possibility that some geographically specific cities will be flooded. It will further lead to droughts, floods, shortage of drinking water and diseases. According to IPCC 2010, global warming could initiate methane gas release in large quantities and it is scientifically proven that it is 21 times more lethal than carbon dioxide (Climate Change, IPCC 2001).

“The world’s scientists’ warning to humanity”, an article signed by 1575 worlds’ top scientists in 1992 suggested that the “irretrievable mutilation” threatened the ecology of the planet due to rapid increase in scale and rate at which our society (mainly the richest capitalist economies) is pushing the earth’s natural processes capacity to tackle its activities (HW Kendall, 2000). Few examples are: transformation of more than half of earth’s surface by human action, use of more than half of

fresh water sources by humans and the species extinction rate. While the danger of global warming was noticed in the 1980s by the scientists, there was not much attention given to this topic until 1997's international treaty, the Kyoto Protocol (which actually came into force in February 2005). According to the treaty, the major emitter countries are required to reduce or control their greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2% below 1990 levels till 2012. The US and Australia question the reality of global warming and refuse to ratify the treaty. Under the Clean Development Mechanism of Kyoto Protocol, if rich countries invest in developing countries where they claim to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions, they can earn credits. But the evidence so far questions the benefits of these projects (BC O'Neill, M Oppenheimer, 2002). For example, the Australian government might be allowed to finance an appliances producing factory in India which is energy-efficient, but they might not be allowed to do it in Australia. According to the information available from the website of New Scientist, the initial loopholes of treaty meant that even after achieving Kyoto's 5.2% reduction by the industrialised countries, the reduction of the real world would be only 1.5%. All this shows that capitalist governments and the capitalist economic system cannot put the planet or people before profits (F Magdoff, JB Foster, FH Buttel – 2000).

Due to growing awareness of the fact that environmental problems result from human social behaviour, the role of the social sciences are increasingly recognised and it is becoming apparent that sociology and sociological theories can play an important role in highlighting these problems and finding solutions to cope with them. In short, human social behaviour result in environmental problems and their solution lies in societal efforts. It is, therefore seen that in recent times sociologists have shown keen interest in environmental issues. But according to me, environment is very much a topic of concern for sociology for the following reasons:

1. Environmental problems are the result of human social activities and behaviours
2. Environmental problems impact human life as do other social problems
3. To control these environmental problems change in economic and environmental policies is required which in turn depends heavily on political and social factors
4. Social inequality based on colour, race, ethnicity, social class reflect from many environmental problems, as poor and Indigenous people often face more problems when it comes to the environment

**Marx on Environment:**

However it is an old saying that, change yourself first to change the world; unfortunately this approach would be inadequate in this case, keeping in mind the source, pace and magnitude of the global climate change danger. As many of the environmentalists inspire and motivate us to lead and adopt carbon free lifestyle, practically it is impossible if rich economies continue to emit huge amount of greenhouse gases at increasing rates. Marx and Engels were seemed to be well aware of human connection with the environment, therefore they recognised that for socialism it was essential to be ecologically sustainable (I Wallerstein, 1974). According to the Oxford Dictionary, "Capitalism is a social system that is based on the principle of accumulation and growth for own profit, neglecting the consequences." It hardly matters for the capitalists that the things they produce fulfil basic needs of human beings like food, clothing and shelter (K Marx, F Engels, 1920). Marx noted that a "metabolic rift" had been created by capitalism between human beings and the earth. According to him, capitalist farming is "an art of robbing the labourer and the soil" (JB Foster - American Journal of Sociology, 1999). Marx commented in Capital, volume 3; "From the attitudes of influential economic sector of society, private ownership of the world will be as

illogical as private ownership of one person by another. Even the most powerful nation, a whole society or a group of societies does not own the world. The fact is, it is under their possession and they should hand it over in a better condition to the succeeding generations" (K Marx, G Deville, P Lafargue, 1998).

Marx urged a social revolution that would abolish private ownership and finally end the capitalist exploitation of the environment. In Capital, he mentioned that "the capitalist producers rationally govern the processes between humans and the nature; it should be controlled collectively instead of being single handily dominated as a blind power." This should become a law of social production reflecting the relationship between the environment and the humanity. Marx said that "the conscious and rational treatment of the land as eternal communal property is the inalienable condition for the existence and reproduction of the chain of human generations" (K Marx, G Deville, P Lafargue, 1998). Mere knowledge is not enough to control human relationship with nature and something more is required. It requires a complete change in our contemporary social order, something as big as revolution. Marxism provides the basis to understand that how capital accumulation and anti-environmental capitalist trend of production cannot form the basis for a society that is ecologically sustainable or address the urgent climate change crisis.

To Marxism it is no surprise that talk of global warming or climate change has mostly remain unattended. There could be a simple reason for this that solving environmental problems is not a profitable business. It requires investment in new research, industry and technique to solve environmental issues which the capitalist class is not interested to do. Capitalism had some progressive and useful aspects a century ago due to investment in production and growth. But in the 21st century it has decay due to investments in finance and speculation. The solutions suggested by politicians leave the environment in the hands of the market (DJC Shearman, JW Smith, 2007). For example, much debated Carbon Trading Plan- an opportunity where countries and businesses are given a quota to emit carbon and where they can also sell carbon credits to each other. This allows businesses to still emit greenhouse gases whilst making huge profit buying and selling the credits of polluting the atmosphere. Another such solution suggested is, replace the fossil fuels with bio-fuels derived from plants. This has the danger of reducing the supply of crops and food, which will again hit the poor people worldwide.

It is not the role of Marxist tendency to develop any technology but it is the responsibility of the societal residents to decide what roles these solutions will play in their lives. However, sociologists can point out that the use of such technology under capitalism is motivated by profits, which can have serious consequences because under capitalism investment will not be made into the new environment friendly industries if it is not profitable.

#### **Role of Socialist Society:**

Marxist ecologist John Bellany Foster's article in the Monthly Review magazine in February 1995 sates that, "behind most appeals for individual ecological mortality, there lies the presumption that we live in a society where the mortality of the individual is the key to the mortality of society. If people as individuals could simply change their moral stance with respect to nature and alter their behaviour in areas such as propagation, consumption and the conduct of business, all would be well." Foster continues "what we fail to notice while talking about moral transformation is the institutional fact of capitalist society; what might be called the global treadmill of production" (F Magdoff, JB Foster, FH Buttler, 2000).

Foster is trying to summarising Karl Marx's account perspective of how capitalist system operates and tries to identify its anti-ecological characteristics. Most of the solutions suggested

by green groups around the world for an environmental friendly and sustainable world do not succeed because of the tendency to not accepting them into being. Foster added “only a society that places the associated producers at its head and at its heart can open the way for the building of a genuinely feasible sustainable society” (F Magdoff, JB Foster, FH Buttel, 2000). Only a socialist society would be able to control the production and halting it so that we can rethink about, analyse and formulate the best solutions for both the earth and its inhabitants. Profit will not be the only sole criteria of deciding or influencing what is produced or the role and relationships of rich economies with the third world. Global spending on military is more than US\$ 1 trillion a year. Just a fraction of this could eliminate hunger; provide education and access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Cancellation of the third-world debt would result in kick starting the clean development in poor countries. Socialist democratic planning will help setting priorities on the production of certain items, thus restricting the production of pointless commodities. The useless overproduction of products could end, saving forests. These efforts could help in redirecting the investment of wealth created by the society, while operating as cleanly as possible into useful purposes of research and development to meet society's needs. Due to socially directed investment, traditional sources could be very soon replaced by solar energy and wind power.

In the words of Marx, “social wealth will be defined by the degree to which it provides the means for all members of society to develop, maintain and exert their capacities in all possible directions, so that the old society, with its classes and class antagonisms is replaced by an association (society) in which the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all” (K Marx, F Engels, 1920). It is possible only in a socialist system, where public control, planning, production and a new vision towards wealth not based on individual profit and consumption. It would be right to predict that in the next 50 years humanity faces a difficult choice between capitalism and human survival. Climate change is a big issue that needs attention. Protecting and correcting the environment requires dedicated participation worldwide. The issue proven scientifically and this is a crucial period to take action to protect the habitants of the world. Society has a big impact on what gets done in order to support new problems. There is a continuous improvement in the knowledge and awareness of society regarding the issue and I believe, through time, spread of information and discovery of other resources, society will adapt to this big issue.

Humanity will face a catastrophe, if the current situation is not rapidly reversed. Marxist literature can come in handy to protect the nature and man from the problem of capitalism. The decline of empathy by the society for the environment due to capitalism's influence to search for profit can be related to Marx's materialist concept of alienation. The concept of “metabolic rift” by Foster, which was influenced by Marx's “irreparable rift”, explains the departure of the natural world from humans due to capitalism. Marx believed that capitalism leads to competition between labour and capital and thus increases the society's productive capacity but it also leads to overproduction, alienation, exploitation than any social system. An interesting aspect of Marx's analysis is the relationship between “forces” and “relations” of production. The forces include technology, technique and the relations include social, political structures (M Castells, W Hutton, A Giddens, 2000). According to Marx, the forces of production will outrun the relations of production. For example, if a coal company keeps on digging coal to make money and predicts heavy rate of return, it will do everything to influence political parties, power elites and act as a barrier to alternatives developing (JB Foster-Marx's ecology, 2000).

**Conclusion:**

Marxists have stated in the past that there is a choice between Socialism and Barbarism. With the

threat of global warming and today's ecological crisis, we can say that there is a choice between Socialism and Extinction. The development of society must be planned in order to address the environmental issues. Businesses like mines, electricity, water which are privately owned with a sole purpose of making profit, must be brought into public control to operate democratically. Banking, insurance and financial sectors must be brought under public ownership in order to direct investment. This would help in investment in development of agriculture, technology and research to enable society's resources to be properly planned for the betterment of the people and the world. Marxist analysis that capitalism is the main cause of climate change and is the major obstacle to prevent it has been seen differently by different people (JB Foster – 2000). Individual greed as the cause of climate change and efforts from all of us to control climate change has been rejected. This is due to the fact that in capitalist society the efforts and sacrifice by ordinary people will not stop big industries to use fossil fuels. Also it rejects the idea that overpopulation is the reason, because greenhouse gas emission is directly related to capitalist growth not population.

Sociology provides the solution to this. Now when it is clear that capitalist industries, countries or states are the main polluters, all we need is a strong social force more powerful than these corporations. The capitalist corporations depend on the workers. Without them it is impossible to produce or make profit. The working class is growing everywhere and it is the time they realise their power and become active. Socialists have to make people understand that they need to take control of the society.

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