

Marx, Thoreau, and Us

Political economy, perennial economy

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From July 1845 to September 1847, Thoreau lived at Walden Pond outside of Concord in a small cabin he built largely from scrap. Uninformed cynics typically criticize him either for staying close to town instead of seeking authentic wilderness—or for staying in the cabin only briefly; Thoreau himself made no great claims for his experiment, as he called it, explaining that he was attempting to “live deliberately,” to explore himself, to turn his attention to the woods. (In his essay, “Walking,” he also says that he prefers a kind of “border life” at the boundary between civilization and wilderness). Thoreau finished *Walden* after returning from the woods to embark on the “other lives” he said he still needed to live.

Around the same time, Marx and Engels met and decided to collaborate. Marx penned his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in 1844; Engels wrote *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* in 1845.

My discovery of Marx as a teenager a century and a quarter later led me to a life of radical activism for freedom and justice. After years as a socialist, I rejected marxism for an anti-capitalist anarchism still deeply imbued with Marx’s critique of capitalist alienation, the commodity, and class society, a perspective that continues to shape my response to the world today.

In my twenties, I read and considered Emerson a naive, occasionally charming, and often annoying petit bourgeois idealist, and had only glanced at Thoreau. In the early to mid-1980s, radical ecology and critical texts on technology gradually led me to transcendentalism. When I read *Walden*, Thoreau’s essays, and selections from his journals for the first time in the 1980s and early 1990s, a new world opened up to me. This was an anti-capitalism of a different sort—not a radical political economy but perhaps an anti-political economy.

As time has gone by, I find myself going back to Marx to examine what seems to be a series of brilliant errors. I read with Marx and against him, in a counter-current to his work. There are moments when I stand with him, of course—relentless search beneath appearance and illusion, his elegant dialectic of inversion and antithesis, his descriptions of the bloody disasters of class society, of the foibles of human beings making their history as history makes them, of history as irony, tragedy, and farce (including the ironies, tragedies, and farces of marxism).

Despite Thoreau’s occasional moments of petulance that incline one to wince—where, for example, this diffident bachelor trains his Yankee asperity on women, who remained for him a melancholy mystery—I go to Thoreau for renewal, to slake a thirst. I read with Thoreau; returning to him regularly, as he might say, not for facts but for truths, not to read the times but the eternities. His observations of wild nature, his piercing humor, his wild and impossibly beautiful paradoxes, his crazy wisdom never cease to remind me of what seems an almost forgotten way to read the times. His subtle simplicity and obscure clarity put all scholastic complexities to shame. He puts my own hesitations and cowardly submissions to shame.

Marx’s opus from the beginning is a paean to work, to homo faber (man the worker) and to the achievements of human labor. For Marx, “productive life is ... species life,” and “the practical construction of an objective world, the manipulation of inorganic nature, is the confirmation of man as a species being.” In his Manuscripts, Marx reasoned that though ancient civilizations had built temples “in the service of the gods, just as the product belonged

to the gods,” in fact neither the gods nor nature were the masters of labor. “What a paradox it would be,” this promethean revolutionary observed, “if the more man subjugates nature through his labor and the more divine miracles are made superfluous by the miracles of industry, the more he is forced to forgo the joy of production and the enjoyment of the product out of deference to these powers.”

Under capitalism, Marx argued in *Capital*, the tools and productive apparatus—the factory system—had become “a huge automaton,” a “mechanical monster” with “demon power,” “a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman,” now reduced to “a mere living appendage.” Indeed, “the greater the product, the more [humanity] is diminished.” But, he insisted in the Manuscripts, “if the product of labor does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, then this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker. If the worker’s activity is a torment for him, to another it must give satisfaction and pleasure. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over men.”

Because capitalism created the material basis for socialism, Marx and Engels championed capitalist economic development, even while protesting its horrors. In *The Communist Manifesto*, they declared, “Subjection of nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?” Lenin defined socialism as “merely state capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people,” a matter of “workers’ soviets plus electrification,” and by the 1930s, soviet ideologues were demanding the “liquidation” of nature for the good of the socialist paradise.

Anarchists, too, have argued that while the machines engendered by industrial capitalism have been fundamental to the dispossession of human beings, they are also the key to liberation. One is reminded of Murray Bookchin’s feverish vision of capital’s technological cornucopia once the workers get their hands on the levers. “The most pressing task of technology will be to produce a surfeit of goods with a minimum of toil,” he tells us in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*. “Free communities would stand at the end of a cybernated assembly line with baskets to cart the goods home.” (This book, mystifyingly, established his reputation as an eco-philosophical visionary—at least according to him and his devotees.)

But before this was possible, Marx and Engels argued, the workers had to lose their tools, the farmers their land, become mere appendages of the machine in order, ultimately, to become its masters. Even the earliest class divisions could be justified by virtue of the fact that they destroyed the former “backward conditions of scarcity” and laid the foundations for communism. Progress would destroy “infantile” myths and strip the world of its halos and mystification by urbanizing the countryside, centralizing production, and rescuing people from the “idiocy of rural life.” Once the workers appropriated the means of production and established communism, alienation would end and practical “self-activity” would “coincide with material life,” casting off “all natural limitations.” Finally, “the appropriation of a totality of instruments of production” would signal “the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves.”

If, according to Marx’s *Manuscripts*, “Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself; if “just as he estranges his own activity from himself, so he confers upon the stranger an activity which is not his own,” this was not the only possible description of human estrangement. For Thoreau, the “means of production” themselves were also, inevitably, ends; and this alien power—“man himself—was a power perfectly capable, as the Buddhists put it, of tying himself up without a rope. In “Civil Disobedience,” after citing the motto, “That government is best which governs least,” he adds: “That government is best which governs not at all.” In *Walden* we find a parallel idea; if, as with government, less economic activity is better, zero economic activity must be best.

In *Walden*, Thoreau does not address the terrible conditions of the working classes in the satanic mills of England (though he passionately and eloquently demanded social justice for the immigrant Irish laborer and the captive African). He is rather, reflecting on the relatively affluent and independent life of some of the most privileged people on the planet at the time, the New England farmers who are his neighbors. When the ideology of progress justified shoveling hungry children into factories on the European continent, and spurred industrial and agricultural expansion across America—most graphically in the form of the locomotive, the axe, the gun, the plow, and, let us not forget, the poisoned blanket—Thoreau’s reflections at Walden Pond recall an anarchist tradition dating

back to the breakup of the original communities and the consequent emergence of class societies and a kind of ancient proto-capitalism.

These farmers were to some degree, of course, dialectically complementary to and dependent on the stolen labor and lives of enslaved Africans in the American South. But whatever the source of much of their wealth, the farmers and small tradesmen of New England were also part of a larger pattern. Diogenes the Cynic, an early anarcho-primitivist sage, summed up the tragedy of accumulation and progress in his aphorism, "A man keeps and feeds a lion; the lion owns a man." Thoreau, dubbed the "Yankee Diogenes" by a contemporary reviewer, examines this predicament, questioning progress, accumulation, property, work, and industrialization by turning the whole value system on its head.

Thoreau begins *Walden* by telling the reader, "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in."

Observing the industrious New Englanders tending their wealth, Thoreau comments with his characteristic wit that they "appeared ... to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Brahmins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders 'until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach;' or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars—even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor ... By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal."

This is "a fool's life," he adds, "as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before ... When the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him..."

As we have seen, for Marx and his followers, true freedom meant more—more power, more accumulation, more reach—and mass technics could only be the instrument of proletarian liberation. "It took both time and experience," wrote Marx in *Capital*, "before the workpeople learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which they are used."

According to radical political economy's paradigm, under private capitalism the alienated worker functions as a slave to another and for another. In contrast, under marxian "communism," the proletariat will finally wrest the deed to the property from the cold, dead fingers of the capitalists, then put private property "into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe," as Engels explained. Communism will finally replace "the government of persons" with "the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production."

In reality, as Thoreau reminds us, "We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us." According to the perspective of perennial economy, it does not ultimately matter who "owns" the machinery or the fruits of the machinery (though only a single-minded doctrinaire would assert that there could be no unambiguous difference at all). What matters is what one is required to surrender in order to produce and maintain this technological and social machinery, and the inevitable life of desperation, be it quiet or loud, one finds oneself living in order to do so.

In this sense, then, Thoreau seems more radical than Marx, as Lewis Mumford observed in *The Myth of the Machine*. "Men have become the tools of their tools," states Thoreau. "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end ..." And he adds: "To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet..."

More of more has come to mean still more, always beyond the reach of the billions unable to achieve even barely enough to survive. Human mastery is dismembering global and local life webs in its search for the land of megatechnic milk and honey. And the planetary work machine is in fact (de)grading the entire biosphere. Since the emergence of global capitalism, more people than ever before—most of them forced by poverty and war, some

enticed by industrial tourism—have been uprooted and scattered around the planet. In the process, the world is everywhere turning into the same place—an air-conditioned high-rise fortress standing amid the ruins of villages now reduced to smoldering cesspools. Smog from ships, aircraft, and motor vehicles is now detected everywhere on earth, including over remote expanses of ocean, and the petrochemical scars from jet fuel carve and contaminate the skies. Climatologists now talk soberly of “climate death.”

And yet the idea of industrial progress continues to drive us forward, if only as a gesture of resignation. Thoreau observes, “Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts ‘All aboard!’ when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over—and it will be called, and will be, ‘A melancholy accident.’”

And here we cannot help but think of the “melancholy accident” that was state socialism under the banners of Marx and all the politicians who fastened their wagons to his name. We also think of the melancholy disaster of urban-industrialism unfolding around us—for the multitudes daily crushed under the iron wheels, but also imminently for the few who are, for the time being, riding. Who are we? Where are we going? Why does it appear to be so utterly impossible to stop, even to divert, the march of “progress”? Only a perennial economy can begin to confront these uncertainties.

And what if Marx’s dreamscape could somehow function without becoming an ecological calamity, and we were to find ourselves riding the train, possessors at last of the “satisfaction and pleasure” previously usurped by someone else? What if temples and pyramids were now raised to glorify those who built them, their own “species life,” rather than glorifying God or Master? In such a case we may organize “production anew on the basis of free and equal association of the producers” (Engels)—but we will surely have to attend meetings every night to feed and keep the lion, as well—a condition akin to Thoreau’s “confirmed desperation.”

According to the perennial wisdom of ancient cynics, taoist dropouts, indigenous sages, and this anarchist eccentric, not only the alienated mode but the temples themselves are to be viewed with suspicion. “If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man, and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages, it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them costly,” he argues, and he adds, in a moment of simple yet remarkable economic insight: “and the cost of a thing is an amount of what I call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.” We seem to be seeing only now how much life the earth has had to surrender in the long run.

“To what end, pray, is so much stone hammered?” asks Thoreau. “In Arcadia, when I was there, I did not see any hammering stone ... One piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon. I love better to see stones in place.” Building monuments, a nation “buries itself alive.” While many are curious about who built the monuments of the past, he comments, “for my part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them—who were above such trifling...” Even three pieces of limestone he had collected provide a lesson in accumulation and the construction of an artifactual world; “terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still,” he tells us, “I threw them out the window in disgust.”

Too humble to casually dismiss the laborers who built civilization, Thoreau imagines “a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land” to demand, “Is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?” and he responds, “Yes, ... comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt...”

Of course, Marx has an answer to this primitivist impulse, calling it “crude communism,” a “levelling-down” and “an abstract negation of the entire world of culture and civilization, the regression to the *unnatural* simplicity of the *poor* and crude man who has few needs and who has not only failed to go beyond private property, but has not even reached it.” Marx has a point—does questioning the *more* mean throwing the accumulated treasures of human labor out the windows of our museums, libraries, and homes? But let us also recall Marx’s championing of the British conquest of India and all the allegedly necessary violence against the “poor and crude” men and women living in tipis, huts, and the like who had to be dragged into history by the hair. There is no simple answer to this contradiction.

As for me, I confess to having my Marx days and my Thoreau days—and more of them, just lately, have probably been Marx days. I can get mad as hell about the dizzying injustices of this world—the mothers and fathers dragged

away from their families to kill and die in Iraq, the other families huddling under the rockets' red glare, the mind-numbing daily slavery and also the terror of the unemployed when the house note is due, the people rifling through garbage for a pin to sell or hard crumb to devour, the brazen plunder of the plutocrats in their gold limousines on their way to global conferences to increase the profits of the Combine.

I find myself desperately defending the “trifling” and the “comparatively good” from the catastrophe brought upon us all by the frenzied, tragic greed of the men at capital's helm, for whom far too much is still not enough. Clearly, my Marx days are also Gandhi days—I know well that for many people on this earth, a little less would be a disaster, and a little more would go a long way. I still believe, as Gandhi put it, that there's enough in the world for everyone's need, just not enough for some people's greed.

But my Thoreau days remind me, too, that it can be a curse even to yearn for the wrong thing, for that green light at the end of the distant dock, which seems to be the green breast of a new and promising world. And to demand it? To fight for it? To see it as the culmination of human history? Now that state socialism is all but dead, I think there may be another socialism worth salvaging from the ruins, a socialism with enough good sense to recognize the perennial wisdom required to keep it from becoming more of the same old plague.

The power of the megatechnic bribe and its obsession to create a “higher” standard of living brought neither revolution nor mastery, but rather a deepening loss of autonomy and a radically diminishing capacity to establish a simpler, deeper mode of life. Mumford was not alone in recognizing this problem. Gandhi did the same in his defense of the spinning wheel as meditative cosmos and basis for autonomy, his defense of vernacular village culture against industrialism. By the end of the twentieth century, indigenous and village peoples were resisting global development and explicitly defending both the form and content of ancient lifeways, and green radicals were questioning the industrial hydra altogether.

In contrast to the project of promethean mastery over “inorganic matter” (read: nature), a perennial economy insists on raising questions that sound incomprehensible to most people today; it asks why, and for what purpose? And it reminds us that less is more—not less in the sense of an enforced penury, as with the children Engels rightly championed, wasting away in the textile mills of England, and the children locked into sweatshops today, dying to produce this higher, commodity- and energy-bloated standard of living for export to the metropole—but as a conscious choice, a decision to establish a deeper and more egalitarian form of (self-) mastery.

We still face this choice there may still be time to acquire enough wisdom to “improve [our] advantages” by carefully and mindfully abandoning our present fool's life. Doing so could bring a freedom we can now barely imagine—a freedom that might come from being suckled by the wolf of our own wildness, and from the recognition of what fields we were indeed called to labor in.

Note: This critique of Marx has been informed by Langdon Winner's invaluable *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (1977). I cover similar ground in *Beyond Bookchin: Preface, for a Future Social Ecology* (1996), and in “Marxism, Anarchism and the Roots of the New Totalitarianism” (in the July 1981 FE). For Mumford's comments on Marx and Thoreau, see *The Pentagon of Power* (1970), chapter twelve.

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