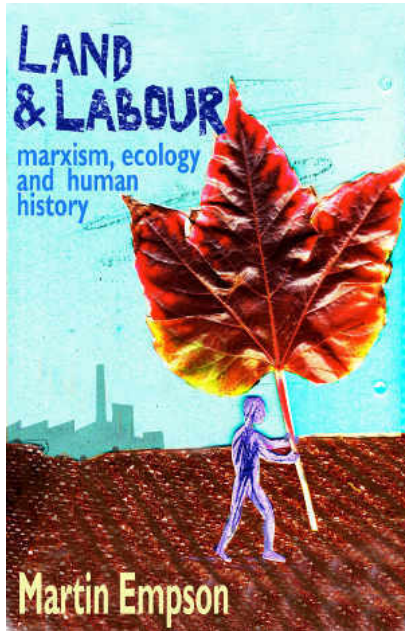


Review: Martin Empson, *Land and Labour :Marxism, Ecology and Human History*

Conor Kennelly



Martin Empson, *Land and Labour :Marxism, Ecology and Human History* 2014 Bookmarks £12

Martin Empson's *Land and Labour* provides a Marxist analysis of the dynamic relationship between humanity and nature. As we are approaching a 'tipping point' beyond which Global Warming is unstoppable, it is critical that this relationship is understood. We need to understand that this relationship is not unchanging, nor simply one of humanity greedily and ceaselessly exploiting nature though that is certainly a feature of modern capitalism. *Land and Labour* does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of humanity and its relationship with nature. However, many useful and fascinating examples throughout history are provided that demonstrate the dynamic nature of the relationship. Martin Empson focuses in particular on the development of agriculture, a subject that is all too often ignored

by Marxist writers though a majority of the global workforce could be described as peasants until very recently. The production of food itself is a very serious political issue as more people are questioning what multinationals like Monsanto are putting into the food we consume.

As humanity has evolved, it has had to alter the natural landscape around it. Even hunter-gatherer societies have had a profound effect on their immediate environment. Empson cites the example of the first North Americans. Within 2,000 years, they had hunted to extinction the large fauna that they found on the continent and had to turn to other means of sustenance. As Empson puts it, 'Even small numbers of people with simple tools could fundamentally alter the natural world' (Empson, p.17).

In changing the natural world, humans also changed themselves. Human labour is by its very nature a social act. Hunting and gathering is a collective process that involves a degree of planning and organisation. Anthropological studies have revealed how such societies were largely egalitarian and democratic as there was no social surplus produced that necessitated the division of society into classes. As agricultural methods began to predominate over hunter and gathering, a surplus was produced that allowed a section of society to live off the labour of others and control this surplus. This also made it possible for non-agricultural work to evolve such as pottery and other non agricultural trades and crafts. Empson describes the development of the great early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Mayans of Mesoamerica. While these civilizations

grew enormously and left a legacy of massive public monuments that testify to the great wealth of their rulers, they eventually collapsed due to a complex combination of their own internal contradictions and environmental factors.

The ancient Mayans created a civilization that lasted nearly three millennia and thrived throughout much of Central America. This was an extremely advanced society. Though they did not have wheeled transport, the Mayans traded massive quantities of food and other products by sea. The massive pyramids still standing today are evidence of the sophistication of their architecture. Moreover, it's also evidence of the fact that a large agricultural surplus was produced such that thousands of people were able to spend many years engaging in such unproductive activity. However, Mayan society was beset by contradictions. 70 percent of the population were peasants who lived off the land and produced the agricultural surpluses to allow a minority of priests and royalty to live off this surplus. The northern cities such as Chichen Itza were less hierarchical and involved a wider layer of the population in the public administration than the southern cities. When environmental catastrophe struck around 800 AD, Chichen Itza was in a better position to cope and survive the crisis. In contrast, the southern ruling class, which was more aloof from the every day concerns of its population, did not take any measures to deal with the crisis. As Empson argues: 'What the end of the classic period of Maya civilisation tells us is that political choices [made by a civilisation] cannot be divorced from other factors in society. Environmental changes will be of major importance [to a society], but rarely will they be the only deciding factor.' (Empson, p.56).

There is hardly any part of the global landscape that has not been affected by

human labour. Empson cites the example of the Norfolk Broads which have been celebrated in tourist handbooks and other publications as a place of unspoilt natural beauty. Similarly, in Ireland, the tourist industry promotes an image of idyllic rural pastorals untouched by human hands. The reality is vastly different as a cursory glance at a Google satellite map of Ireland would demonstrate. The effects of agriculture can be seen all over the country most demonstrably in the human made ditches and dykes that divide farms and irrigate fields. Growing up on a farm I was all too aware of how my father and his ancestors had altered the features of the farm. My great grandfather had straightened a river that flowed through one of the fields with relatively primitive tools in the 19th century. My father had drained several fields that were once all bog land. More fields were amalgamated by levelling ditches that themselves were made by previous generations. Grass yields were significantly increased by spreading substantial amounts of fertiliser which can't have been too beneficial for the rivers that drained the land. The runoff from silage and cattle sewage likewise killed whatever freshwater fish remained in the rivers. More recently, as a Google map image of the farm shows, the new owner has accelerated this process buying neighbouring farms and creating even bigger fields. Irish farm sizes have increased in size as smaller farms cannot compete. EU subventions disproportionately benefit the big farmers as grants are based on acreage. While the changes to the rural landscape have been more dramatic in recent decades, humans have been altering the topography of Ireland since they first came here. While there are understandable efforts to conserve Irish bog lands, they also are indirect product of human labour as a result of large-scale deforestation going back to pre-historical

times. The stupendous passage tombs at Newgrange and Knowth built by engineers with knowledge of astronomy suggest a sophisticated Neolithic agricultural civilization that must have cultivated large areas of land.

Such changes to the landscape are also a product of class struggle. Most land in Ireland was settled by Anglo Norman and later English and Scottish colonists. The colonists cut down forests where rebels might hide but also to further cultivate the land. The introduction of the potato to Ireland further altered the landscape and caused a massive population increase in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the late nineteenth century, the mainly Catholic tenant farmers won back the land after a vicious and bloody struggle led by the Land League. By the time of independence, a class of small farmers had been created who were the bedrock of support for Sinn Fein and later Fianna Fail, the bigger rancher type farmers tending to support Fine Gael. However, as I've noted above, small farms are becoming obsolete and less than 5 percent of the population now lives off the land in Ireland.

Empson details how the English peasantry fought enclosures from the 16th century as agriculture intensified and market forces predominated. Legislation passed in parliament favoured landowners right to take ownership of land that had once been commonly farmed. This also changed the landscape as feudal strip farming was replaced by enclosed farms. The English Revolution accelerated this transformation as capitalist landowners emerged victorious in spite of attempts to resist enclosures led by radicals such as Gerard Winstanley.

An understanding of the process of historical change is essential if we want to explain how it is possible to change the world for the better. As history all too

clearly shows, it does not proceed progressively in a smooth linear path. The inability of great civilizations to cope with environmental crisis as a result of their own inner contradictions has led quickly to their destruction and disappearance. Socialists also reject the ruling class ideology common in school history books that history is made by great individuals such as Winston Churchill or Michael Collins. Empson provides a clear and useful summary of the Marxist theory of historical materialism. He explains it that 'For Marx the 'fundamental condition of all history' was that before different humans can build cathedrals or pyramids, create laws and legal institutions, or new technologies, they first of all must find ways of obtaining the basic necessities of life.' (Empson, p115). An understanding of the productive process and how this takes place under different class societies is therefore required.

Capitalism is different from all preceding class societies in that its driving force is accumulation for the sake of accumulation. Under capitalism, there are no limits to exploitation as each unit of capital has to compete with all the others. Surplus value in the form of profits is reinvested in the production process by each capitalist rather than consumed. Empson concludes that 'It is the centrality of the accumulation of wealth in this way that is of greatest importance to understanding the ecological relationship between capitalist society and the natural world. It is because of this dynamic that capitalism relates to nature completely different to previous human societies. As Marx put it, 'nature becomes purely an object for humankind' (quoted in Empson, p.210).

The logic of capitalist competition forces each capitalist to obtain the maximum profit possible; otherwise, they will fall behind their competitors and go out of business. Production is therefore or-

ganised around the short term and the effect on nature, negative or otherwise is not a concern for the capitalist. Empson quotes the Marxist ecologist, John Bellamy Foster who writes that 'air pollution caused by a factory is not treated as a cost of production internal to that factory, rather it is viewed as an external cost to be borne by nature and society'. Empson cites the notorious example of the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal in India when a chemical leakage killed over 20,000. This was a direct result of the firm cutting corners in order to save money. There are numerous examples in Ireland that reinforce this very point. Pharmaceutical multinationals in Cork harbour break the EPA's regulations every day yet not one firm has ever been prosecuted for breaking these regulations. The construction industry could happily ignore planning regulations and build housing estates on flood plains across the country during the Celtic Tiger. Shell, one of the largest corporations in the world, has been able to ride roughshod over local objections to its potentially dangerous gas pipeline in North Mayo. The participation in government of either the Greens or the Labour Party has done nothing to impede or delay the pipeline. More recently, this past spring, the working class suburbs of west Dublin were covered in a pall of black smoke from a fire at a recycling plant. The EPA advised people to stay indoors though would not disclose what dangerous toxins might be in the atmosphere that warranted such a warning.

Commodity production has become an end in itself under capitalism. Goods are produced for their exchange value not their use value.

Empson argues against a common environmentalist approach that focuses on individual human consumption rather than question the logic of capitalist production

itself. This approach fails to ask why so many unneeded commodities are produced in the first place nor asks what determines what is produced. Companies are compelled to produce more in order to maximise profits which in turn leads to over production and economic crisis.

This creates enormous waste, a side effect of which is advertising, itself, a hugely wasteful industry that would not be necessary in a rationally organised economy. In addition, obsolescence is built into products so that consumers are continually forced to purchase replacements. As Empson points out later in the book, this is why multinationals such as Coca-Cola and the major bottling companies have campaigned against US states that rewarded consumers for re-usage as opposed to recycling. They came together in the 1950's to form the Keep America Beautiful campaign that placed the emphasis on individual consumer responsibility for litter as opposed to the corporations taking responsibility for producing so much disposable plastic packaging. Recycling, while it shouldn't be discouraged, is not a solution to the problem of waste and pollution as it does not challenge the insane logic of capitalist production and ignores the fact that consumers only account for a small minority of waste, most of which is created by industry and agriculture.

The majority of the world's population now live in cities. Once predominantly rural societies like China have seen millions move to the Eastern urban seaboard in the last 4 decades and join the urban proletariat. Empson challenges the argument that urban living is less sustainable than rural living. A more densely populated city such as New York has a lower carbon footprint per capita than a city like Houston where more people live in the suburbs. Stockholm has an even lower carbon footprint because of the promotion of

‘public transport, as well as developing a widespread bike culture... so that on a winter’s day 19 percent of Stockholmers will be using bicycles... [This] rises to 33 percent in summer’ (quoted in Empson, p.245). A more densely populated conurbation allows for a more efficient public transport service with shorter journeys from home to work for example.

As Empson points out, because cities concentrate huge numbers of workers in one location they can also become the focus for workers’ struggle. The occupation of Tahrir Square in January 2011 was the catalyst for the mass demonstrations and even more critically mass strikes that overthrew Mubarak the following month. The global demonstrations against the Iraq war on February the 17th, 2003, while not stopping it, still managed to shift the political debate about the war such that the US and Britain have been very reluctant to launch similar attacks since. Older readers of this journal will recall the feeling that another world was indeed possible when over a 100,000 protested in Dublin on that day.

A future democratic socialist society will have to give careful thought as to how a city like Dublin for example might be re-designed so that journeys between home and work can be reduced and how the city could become a more pleasurable place to live for all its citizens. Currently, Dublin city council is thinking of restricting motorists to one lane of traffic on the quays and devoting two lanes to cyclists. While the objective is to reduce private transport in the city, there isn’t any questioning of the reckless planning or lack of public transport that means thousands of commuters have no alternative but to use the car to travel to work. Suburban housing estates have been built all over the

greater Dublin area without any consideration as to how residents were to access public transport, schools and shops and other facilities. City centre apartment complexes are not family friendly and few were built with proper sound and heat insulation.

The urgency of Global Warming and rapid Climate Change is becoming all the greater as more statistics demonstrate the seriousness of the problem facing humanity. Yesterday’s Guardian (the 24th of June) published new statistics that show that this May was the warmest on record globally. To listen to parochial reactionaries like Kevin Myers that tend to dominate the discussion in Ireland, one would think that this is not a serious problem as they generalise from the experience of Irish weather. However, as Empson points out, recent cold winters in Northern Europe are actually a consequence of unseasonably warmer winters in Arctic regions. The rate of increase of sea levels has accelerated since 1992 as a result of the melting of Greenland and Antarctica. A New Scientist article states that this melting may already be irreversible meaning that sea levels could rise as much as 13 metres over time.¹

Cities like New York, London and Rio de Janeiro (and presumably Dublin, Belfast, Cork etc) will become uninhabitable. As the article points out, Superstorm Sandy that struck New York in 2012 was made worse by rising sea levels. As Empson shows, the effects of Climate Change are felt much more severely in the poor South such as the floods caused by Typhoon Haiyan that killed tens of thousands of Filipinos last year. It was the poor in New Orleans that were the main victims of Hurricane Katrina as the government refused to requisition public transport to help them escape the flooding. Unless

¹<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22229752.600-ice-sheets-may-have-already-passed-point-of-no-return.html#.U6tgskDLKDg>

immediate action is taken very soon the consequences for humanity will be catastrophic. Powerful corporate interests have ensured that fossil fuels will continue to dominate our energy usage if their power isn't challenged any time soon. The US has twice gone to war in Iraq and given billions in aid to its client state, Israel to ensure that the major world oil supplies remain in the control of pro-Western regimes such as the Saudi royal family. Obama has given the go ahead to fracking and Alaskan oil exploration while the US now imports most of its oil from Canadian tar sand sources. The history of capitalism since the Industrial Revolution has been integrally tied up with the development of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas.

Given the urgency of the problem, there couldn't be a better argument for a mass social revolution that challenges the priorities of the system. A reformist approach that advocates piecemeal gradual change can not even begin to seriously tackle the scale of the problem. The Green Party minister of transport in the last government, Eamon Ryan (now its current leader) actually reduced the number of buses on Dublin roads as a cost cutting measure in response to the fiscal crisis caused by the bailout of the banks.

Empson envisages how a future socialist society would prioritise human need instead of profit and begin to restructure the economy and energy and transport usage

in such a way that is sustainable and benefits the mass of humanity. Re-forestation would ensure that millions of trees would function as a carbon sink. Resources would be transferred from fossil fuel sourced energy to renewable energy and public transport. Studies have shown how solar farms in the Sahara could provide most of the energy needs of both Africa and Europe and possibly the planet. The objection by mainstream economists is based on cost. However, just imagine if the trillion dollars that is spent every year on arms spending was instead spent on investment in renewable energy sources, never mind the wasteful spending on nuclear energy and oil and gas exploration. The common usage of resources such as communal kitchens for example, would cut down massively on energy usage.

In this scenario, the mass of humanity should be seen as part of the solution not the problem as some environmentalists mistakenly believe. As Empson argues, the process of revolution changes people as they begin to consciously realise their power and its huge democratic potential to change the world for the better.

Martin Empson has provided us with very convincing arguments as to why we need to take our relationship with the natural world very seriously and how we can create a sustainable socialist society for the betterment of humanity and nature.