

Marx and the ecological crisis

Studying Modern Capitalism – The Relevance of Marx Today
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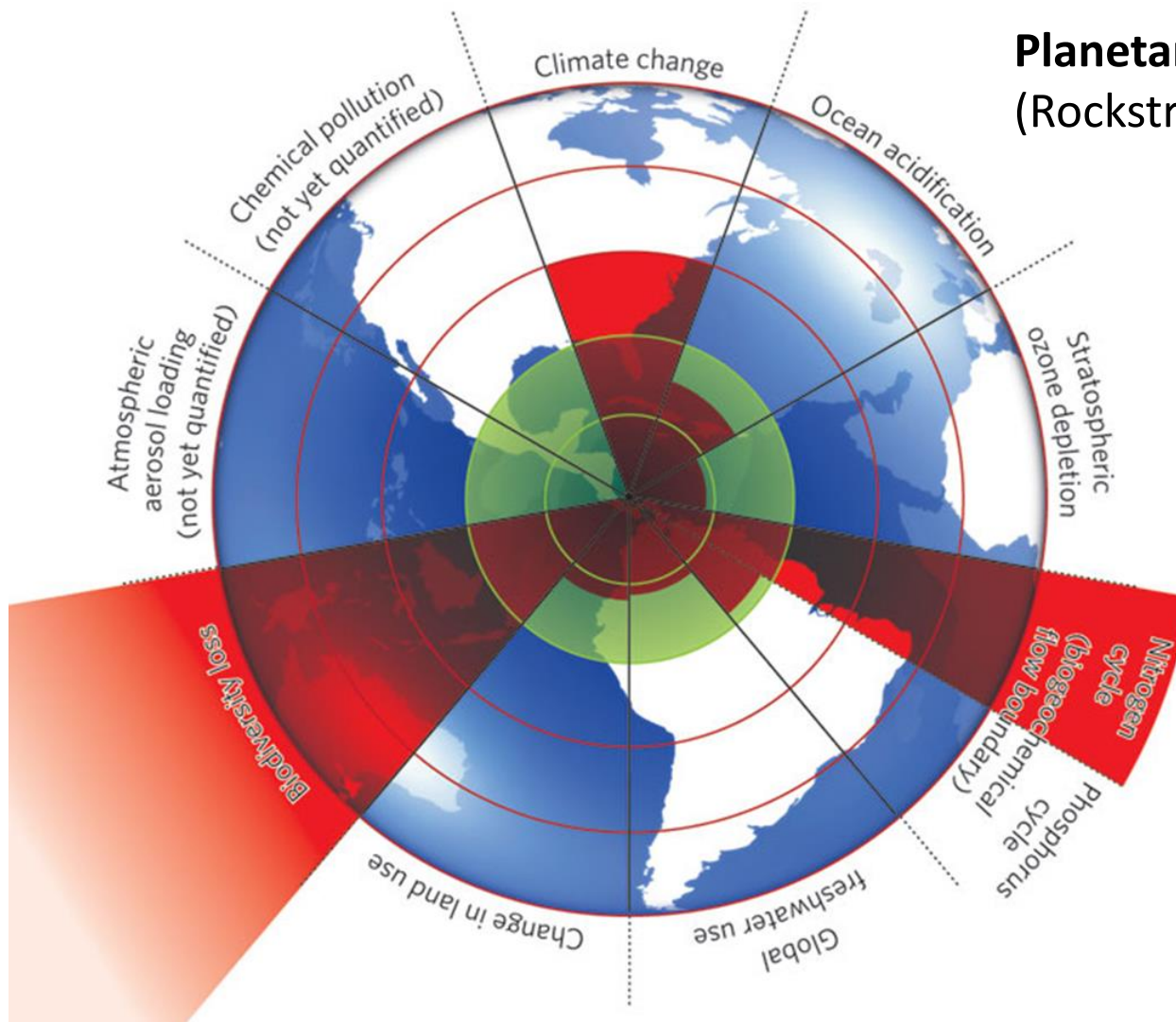
Structure

1. The ecological crisis – dominant views
2. Marx on society-nature relations
3. Understanding the ecological crisis with Marx

1. The ecological crisis – dominant views

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Planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009)



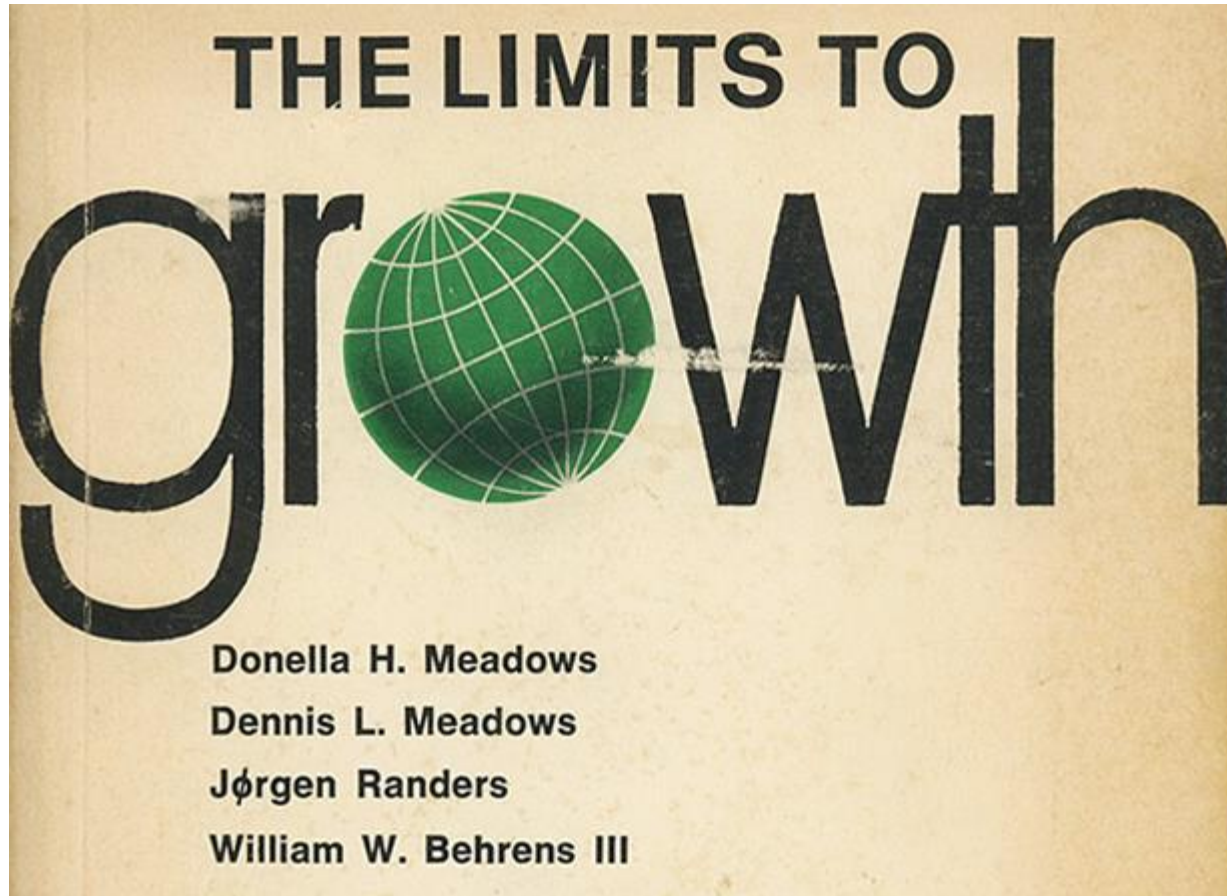
Humanity “is undermining the planetary life-support systems on which it depends” (Lövbrand et al. 2015), i.e. it is leaving the “safe operating space”.

1. The ecological crisis – dominant views



Anthropocene: a „human-dominated, geological epoch“
(Crutzen 2002)

1. The ecological crisis – dominant views



Earlier approach: **Limits to growth** (Meadows et al. 1972)

1. The ecological crisis – dominant views

Critique

“the Anthropocene reveals the power of humans, but it conceals who and what is powerful and how that power is enacted”
(Baskin, quoted in Lövbrand et al. 2015: 216)

1. The ecological crisis – dominant views

„Post-social ontology“ of the Anthropocene discourse (Lövbrand et al. 2015), regarding both

- the causes of the ecological crisis
- the impacts of the ecological crisis

→ *humanity*

2. Marx on society-nature relations

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Metabolism between humans and nature via labour: „the eternal natural condition of human life, therefore independent of any form of this life, or rather common to all ist social forms“
(*Capital*, Vol. 1)

2. Marx on society-nature relations

Capitalism as a specific social form of organizing the metabolism between humans and nature:
Capitalist production is both

- labour process (→ concrete labour, use value)
- and valorisation process (→ abstract labour, exchange value).

(cf. Altvater 1987)

2. Marx on society-nature relations

Ecological contradiction of capitalism:

- „systematic pressure of profit-maximizing firms to generate negative externalities“
(Wright 2010: 69)
- „Capitalist production develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer.”
(*Capital*, Vol. 1)

2. Marx on society-nature relations

Ecological content of Marx' work:

- no „Promethean“ thinker
- aware of human alienation from nature under capitalism (→ *Paris Manuscripts* from 1844)
- ecological contradiction became ever more important from the 1860s on (→ *Capital* and Marx' excerpts of the work by Justus von Liebig et al.)

3. Understanding the ecological crisis with Marx

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What does that mean for an understanding of, and coping with, the **ecological crisis today**?

→ three lessons to be learnt from Marx

3. Understanding the ecological crisis with Marx

1. It's not simply humankind but capitalism, not Anthropocene but „Capitalocene“ (Altvater 2016, Moore 2016) that has caused the crisis.
→ essentially **social and political character** of the ecological crisis

3. Understanding the ecological crisis with Marx

2. Ecological crisis is a **distributional issue**: “One person’s degradation is another’s accumulation” (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987: 14)

3. Understanding the ecological crisis with Marx

„A single average US citizen emits more than 500 citizens of Ethiopia, Chad, Afghanistan, Mali, or Burundi; how much an average US millionaire emits — and how much more than an average US or Cambodian worker — remains to be counted. But a person’s imprint on the atmosphere varies tremendously depending on where she is born. Humanity, as a result, is far too slender an abstraction to carry the burden of culpability.” (Malm 2015)

3. Understanding the ecological crisis with Marx

3. Overcoming the ecological crisis is not an issue of a technology and market incentives in favour of an ecological modernisation but of **overcoming social domination**.

→ enhancing the “democratic content” (Swyngedouw 2004) of society-nature relations

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