Jack Mundey outlines the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources and the widening gap in both wealth and consumption, between the advanced industrialised and third world countries. He argues that if there is to be any chance to establish a degree of global egalitarianism the control of transnational corporations must be broken and future socialism ecologised. This means self-managed forms of socialism concentrating on the building of a sustainable economy based on the genuine needs of people and not on growthmania and a slavish bowing to a consumer ethic.

Marx’s analysis of capitalism in the 19th century was brilliant. The basic tenets still hold as the 20th century concludes. Marx, Engels and other revolutionaries had a vision of a humane society in which genuine egalitarian values would be applied, poverty and capitalism abolished and the working class would be decisive in fashioning a new socialist society.

Human beings could then begin an all-round development — economically, politically, socially and culturally.

Those hopes haven’t been fulfilled. Even those countries which have abandoned capitalism have failed to measure up to Marx’s vision.

In the mid to late 19th century, Marx could not have been as concerned with ecology as he would be now, for the simple reason that the myriad pressures on the eco-system which are so apparent to us did not exist at that time.

Marx, however, was not oblivious of the restrictions of nature. The first premise of human history, of course, is the existence of living human individuals. The first fact to be established, then is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relationship to the rest of nature, he said, adding Communism as completed naturalism is humanism, and as completed humanism, naturalism.

Given the much lower pressures on nature at that time, it is understandable that Marx was less concerned then than he would have been a century later. It can hardly be doubted that if he were alive now he would give a higher priority to population and ecological problems. For example, the total population of the world was then the same as that of China now. Three-quarters of the world was still unsettled by Europeans. Part of North America, Australia and Asia were just being penetrated and much of Africa was still unknown to Europeans.

The first half of this century saw economic growth falter as the great depression threw capitalism into a giant spin. The depression virtually continued until World War II.

Technology unleashed for destruction in 1939-45 was transferred to “peaceful” use after 1945 and between then and 1973, capitalism experienced an unprecedented and prolonged boom.

There was production of consumer durables which gave rapid rise to the material living standards in all the industrialised world. Saturation advertising force-fed the consumer revolution.

In the three-quarters of this century the world output of goods and services increased by over four percent per year.

Oil played a central role in this century’s third quarter economic boom. Between 1950 and 1973 yearly world oil production increased from less than four billion barrels to over 20 billion. This record growth in oil output, and the associated growth in natural gas, fuelled a record growth in world economic output.

In addition to making overall economic growth easy, cheap oil revolutionised agriculture, spawning spectacular gains in food output. Although the frontiers of agricultural land had largely disappeared by 1950, world grain output doubled between then and 1973. This unprecedented doubling of the world grain harvest raised output per person 31 percent and improved diets throughout the world.
The key to this record growth in food output was chemical fertiliser based on oil and natural gas. Between 1950 and 1973 the world's farmers increased their use of chemical fertiliser fivefold, paralleling the fivefold increase in world oil production during the same period. In this same period, world population increased from 2.5 billion to 4 billion people. Closely tied to oil, automobile production rose rapidly. In 1950, there were 50 million vehicles registered in the world. In 1980 the figure was a staggering 400 million.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the gallant Vietnamese resistance to aggression, and the oil crisis of '73 profoundly affected world capitalism and basic economic activities slowed. The "magical boom" was ending.

On a world-wide per capita basis, the decade of the '70s saw the output of fish, beef and grain peak and decline. The same was the case with the two most widely used fuels, oil and wood. Population is now approaching five billion, and humanity is moving into uncharted territory.

The relationship between population size and the sustainable yield of the earth's biological resources system is uncertain and to an extent unpredictable.

However, with the ongoing depletion of readily accessible non-renewable resources and the widespread deterioration of the economy's biological support systems, economic growth has slowed markedly. Burgeoning population and immense resources usage in the last 30 years are having a lasting impact on our finite globe.

“GROWTHMANIA" OR A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

or most of humanity, particularly those people in industrialised countries, the century's third quarter was a prosperous one. At four percent per year, economic growth exceeded that of even the fastest growing populations. Overall global economic growth was more than double population growth, and from 1950 to 1973 living standards rose throughout the industrialised world. However, few stopped to calculate that a four percent rate of economic growth, if sustained, would lead to a fiftyfold expansion in a century.

Even fewer considered the pressures this would put on the world's resources, both renewable and non-renewable.

At the same time, population is rising rapidly. Even the most optimistic demographers agree that there isn't any chance of stabilising world population at a figure less than 10 billion in the first part of the 21st century.

New economic trends call for dramatic attention to population policies to avoid declines in consumption levels. Political leaders in a few countries have already begun to grasp this. Unfortunately, all too many have not.

Surely we must consider what production and consumption is desirable and necessary. The rich industrialised countries consume far more resources than the third world. For example, the USA with only 6 percent of the world's population consumes 36 percent of resources annually.

Unfettered growth must be replaced by production for social use, and marxists should play a greater role in raising the need to stabilise and then reduce total population if we are to have any possibility of global stability and respect for future inhabitants.

Likewise, we should oppose human chauvinism and fight for a harmonious relationship with other forms of animal and plant life on this small planet. In fact, human survival depends on this happening.

Capitalist economists continue to view the economic system as a mechanical process in which supply and demand functions are continually readjusting to each other in forward and backward motions like swings of a pendulum. Pick up any introductory economics text book and it will tell you that economics is nothing more than the give and take of supply and demand curves.

While socialist economists reject the market mechanism, they agree with the capitalist economists that the overall economic environment is never depleted. As to where the new supply is supposed to come from, both capitalist and socialist economists assume that new technology can always find a way to locate and exploit previous untapped resources. The resource base itself is considered inexhaustible.

Professor Herman Daly, in Towards a Steady State Economy, succinctly explains "growthmania":

Growthmania counts the costs of economic growth as benefits. We take the real costs of increasing GNP as measured by the defensive expenditures incurred to protect ourselves from the unwanted side
effects of production, and then add these expenditures to GNP rather than subtract them. We count the real costs as benefits — this is hypergrowthmania. Since the net benefit of growth can never be negative in this Alice-in-Wonderland accounting system, the rule becomes 'grow forever', or at best until it kills you — and then count your funeral expenses as further growth. This is terminal hypergrowthmania. Is the water table falling? Dig deeper wells, build bigger pumps and up goes the GNP! Mines depleted? Build more expensive refineries to process lower grade ores, and up goes GNP! Soil depleted? Produce more fertiliser, etc. As we press against the carrying capacity of our physical environment, these 'extra effort' and 'defensive' expenditures (which are really costs masquerading as benefits) will loom larger and larger. This creates the illusion of becoming better off when in actuality we are becoming worse off. We may have already passed the point where the marginal cost of growth exceeds the marginal benefits.

As a first step towards the steady state economy we need a rational system of national accounting which would not count costs as benefits.

Hypergrowthmania creates the illusion of becoming better off when in actuality we are becoming worse off. If mines are depleted build more expensive refineries to process lower grade ores, and up goes GNP!

MARXISTS IN THE 21st CENTURY

Rapid depletion of non-renewable resources on an increasingly over-crowded planet and a widening gap in wealth between the advanced industrialised and third world countries, make it extremely difficult to bring about a new international economic order which would overcome the worst of the poverty and gross injustices which exist as the 20th century draws to an end.

If there is going to be any chance to establish a degree of global egalitarianism, the control of transnational corporations must be broken. However, future socialism must be ecologised, and these self-managed forms of socialism must concentrate on building a sustainable economy, based on genuine needs of people, not on growthmania and slavishly bowing to a consumer ethic. The accent should be away from fairy floss quantitative values and towards qualitative values.

In the shorter term the concentration must be for employment to be of a socially useful and socially beneficial nature, with all workers, whether working or not, to be treated equally.

If any society cannot adequately employ all citizens desiring work, society should treat the unemployed in exactly the same manner as the employed.

Automation and technology must be used in the interests of the entire population. Clearly 'work' must be re-defined. New methods of distributing wealth must be accepted and unashamedly promoted as both moral and ethical and at the same time economically necessary and justified.

Arrogant slogans such as "conquering nature and using nature for man's benefit" must be replaced by "humans learning to live in a more harmonious way with the rest of nature".

Ecological sanity and population equilibrium are areas of marxist neglect in the 20th century. They cannot be neglected now if humankind is to survive in a civilised manner in the 21st century.

Jack Mundey is a well known communist, labor movement activist and environmentalist.