

# An Analysis of André Gorz's Ecological Crisis Theory: From Economic Reason to Ecological Reason

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**Abstract:** In response to the current ecological crisis in capitalist society and to revitalize Marxism in the West, Western ecological Marxist analyze the anti-ecological nature of capitalism and advocate an alliance between socialism and the ecological movement. André Gorz, from the perspectives of economic reason and ecological reason, analyzes the root causes of the ecological crisis under capitalism and the ecological characteristics of the socialist movement itself, constructing a path to resolving the ecological crisis and transitioning towards socialism. Despite its utopian aspects, his ideas on limiting economic expansion reason and overcoming false consumption are highly significant for socialist ecological reason civilization construction.

**Keywords:** André Gorz, Ecological Crisis, Economic Reason, Ecological Reason

## 1. Introduction

Capitalism and the ecological crisis emerged almost simultaneously. As early as Marx and Engels lived in that era, the ecological problem was already very serious. Two hundred years ago, Marx deeply analyzed the capitalist system from the perspectives of historical materialism and the inner logic of capitalism, providing a severe critique of it. In the 1950s and 1960s, Western Marxist scholars sought to reconstruct Marxism to make it politically relevant and identified the root causes of the more severe ecological crisis as the irrational production methods and inherent contradictions of capitalism. They hoped to overthrow capitalism through the late-capitalist ecological movement.<sup>[1]</sup>

French philosopher André Gorz, starting from the economic reason of capitalism, criticized the inherently anti-ecological nature of the capitalist system. He conducted a profound analysis of the root causes of the ecological crisis being capitalism itself, with the most pronounced manifestation of the ecological crisis being alienated consumption under capitalism. Furthermore, he proposed that the solution to the ecological crisis and the transition to ecological reason should be achieved through the socialist movement.

## 2. Theory of the Ecological Crisis

Gorz believes that the current ecological crisis in capitalist society is caused by the capitalist system itself. Contemporary capitalist countries not only seek higher profits by exploiting and squeezing surplus value created by workers but also intensify the exploitation and utilization of nature. They do so through promoting consumption, creating false employment, and constructing welfare states to some extent, thereby alleviating the contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Economic crisis gradually transform into ecological crisis, and the conditions for violent revolutions gradually fade away. Under the capitalist system, a profit-oriented "more is better" production method inevitably leads to extensive waste and severe environmental destruction, ultimately resulting in the outbreak of the ecological crisis.

### 2.1. The Inherent Logic of Capitalist Ecological Crisis

Gorz extensively elaborates on the logic of ecological crisis within capitalist societies. In a capitalist society, as long as production does not irreversibly deplete all natural resources, capital assumes that resources are infinite and endlessly renewable, akin to weeds that continuously regenerate. Capital even sees this perpetual cycle of destruction and regeneration as totally beneficial, to the point where it

becomes a precondition for capitalist production. Within the capitalist production process, whether humanity can prudently manage non-renewable resource stocks and control the rate of consumption of renewable resources so that the restorative impact of production is less than its destructive impact becomes pivotal. Due to these two factors, ecological factors play a decisive role in the economic crisis of capitalism. Gorz analyzes the emergence of ecological crisis in the context of capitalism from two perspectives.

The first perspective is the crisis of excessive capital accumulation. Marxist political economy teaches us that as capital accumulates, the organic composition of capital necessarily increases, resulting in a declining profit rate that eventually leads to economic crisis. Capitalists typically respond by increasing the quantity of commodities or raising their prices (exchange value) to counter the decreasing profit rate. For example, they might reduce the durability of goods to sell more products or make goods more complex to command higher prices. This essentially makes contemporary capitalist society a "wealthy" society where everything is oriented towards capital growth. More and more resources, labor, raw materials, etc., are consumed, but people's lives do not significantly improve. This growth can only be temporary and is bound to come to an end when natural resource limits are reached. Capitalist production is fundamentally destructive and wasteful.<sup>[2]</sup>

The second perspective is the crisis of reproduction. According to the law of value, when scarce products lead to price increases, this is followed by an increase in the quantity of goods produced. However, natural resources are not inexhaustible. When resources like clean air, water, and land become scarce, no matter how high their prices rise, production cannot expand further. Capitalists must obtain clean water, air, and other resources as means of production through pollution treatment devices or other means, exacerbating the rise in the organic composition of capital and accelerating the progress of the capitalist crisis.

What we are facing is a typical crisis of excessive accumulation, and the crisis of reproduction intensifies the first type of crisis. After all, the crisis of reproduction is caused by the increasing scarcity of natural resources. When finite natural resources cannot meet the endless expansion of capitalism, the balance between production and consumption and finite natural resources is disrupted, leading to an ecological crisis.

## ***2.2. The root cause of the ecological crisis - the capitalist system***

Marx recognized the anti-ecological nature of capitalism. From its inception, the capitalist system has been engaged in continuous accumulation and expansion, leading to the dual exploitation of both human beings and nature. Wealth is derived not only from the surplus value created by workers but also from nature.<sup>[3]</sup>

Gorz believes that the root cause of the ecological crisis in the current capitalist countries lies in the anti-ecological nature of the capitalist system. The logic of capital is as follows: to create as much demand as possible and seek to satisfy these demands with as many marketable goods and services as possible in order to generate as much profit as possible from the flow of energy and resources. However, the connection between "more" and "better" has now been broken. "Better" may now mean "less," creating as few demands as possible, using as few materials, energy, and labor as possible to meet those demands, and imposing as little burden as possible on the environment.

Capitalism's pursuit of profit is endless, and they never stop chasing surplus value. They uphold the credo of "the more production land the better, the more consumption land the better", which makes capitalism continue to expand production and advocate consumption, resulting in the continuous expansion of the demand for natural resources, excessive production and consumption will inevitably lead to waste, and natural resources themselves are limited, it is impossible to meet the unlimited expansion of capitalism. In this case, the finite nature of the natural resources themselves is in conflict with the expansion of capitalism and the infinity of human consumption desires. To some extent, capitalism has even capitalized the entire human environment. Moreover, under the capitalist system, the social politics dominated by capitalists will only take into account their own interests and will inevitably not restrict such excessive production and consumption modes, so it is not possible to reconcile this contradiction from an ecological perspective. Moreover, in capitalist society, capital always tends to address scarcity issues by expanding production. However, in reality, this leads to a "counter-productivity" problem. When capitalism attempts to solve scarcity problems by expanding production, if it exceeds a certain limit, such as the limits of natural resources, it inevitably creates insurmountable scarcities with negative consequences. For instance, exceeding a certain upper limit, measures that

facilitate the circulation of cars can exacerbate traffic congestion; excessive consumption of medications can increase illness rates; the consumption of energy leads to various forms of pollution, and if these pollution cannot be controlled at their source, they can only be managed by more extensive pollution and increased energy consumption.

### ***2.3. The most prominent manifestation of ecological crisis - alienated consumption***

In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx discussed four forms of alienation labor in capitalism, including the alienation of labor and its product, the alienation of laborer and the labor activity itself, alienation among individuals in capitalist society, and the ultimate alienation of each person from their own human nature. Marx's theory of alienated labor elucidates the alienation of labor under capitalism, a process that should be a self-affirmation of human activity, and it concludes that in capitalist society, everyone is alienated from their own human nature.

Building on Marx's theory of alienated labor, Gorz argues that the most prominent manifestation of alienation in contemporary capitalist society has shifted from the productive labor sphere to the sphere of consumption. Alienation is not confined to the production realm but is more significantly reflected in the consumption sphere. The most striking manifestation of the current ecological crisis in capitalism is alienated consumption. Gorz analyzes how capitalism always directs production to where it can maximize profits and produces goods and services not for satisfying the broadest population's needs but to stimulate people's desire to consume. In this society, the focus shifts from the usefulness of consumption goods to their scarcity and fashionability, making outdated consumer goods symbols of "poverty". People's consumption is not driven by genuine needs but by a desire to create a false sense of "security" through consumption. Alienated consumption makes capitalism more aggressively exploit natural resources, and the unrestrained demand for consumption also leads to extensive waste, ultimately resulting in the ecological crisis.

## **3. Economic Reason and Ecological Reason**

Gorz further explains the fundamental difference between capitalism and socialism through the concepts of economic reason and ecological reason. Capitalism is characterized by social relationships dominated by economic reason and economic relations. It prioritizes the pursuit of capital accumulation and shapes people's lives, activities, values, and culture focus on profit maximization. Socialism, on the other hand, puts economic rationality in a secondary position, and the activities of economic rationality are only activities on an equal footing with other activities in the life of society and individuals, that is, a society constructed in the way of ecological rationality.

### ***3.1. Economic Reason***

Economic rationality primarily refers to the logic of markets and profits. Capitalist society is a production-oriented society based on "labor-commodity". The birth of capitalism and economic reason are closely related. When the purpose of production is no longer self-consumption but exchange, driven by market demand, economic reason inevitably emerges. If an activity aims to maximize output with various inputs to achieve the greatest yield, it is a performance of economic rationality.

In Gorz's view, the birth of capitalism benefited from the removal of societal constraints such as religion, culture, aesthetics, etc., that suppressed economic reason in previous societies.<sup>[4]</sup> Economic reason itself is intrinsically linked to the spirit of capitalism. With the weakening of religious restrictions on society, economic reason replaced religion as the guiding principle for human actions in the capitalist society. The purpose of economic reason is always to maximize the circulation of goods in the market to satisfy various needs, and it employs the most profitable technological means of production, prioritizing profit maximization. Activities solely governed by economic reason accumulate economic surplus very easily. They continuously create and stimulate demand, focusing on stimulating people's desires, resulting in the unlimited expansion of production and consumption. Simultaneously, capitalist society constructs a political system, the "administrative-bureaucratic social form," to serve economic reason and the efficiency and effectiveness of market competition. This political system pursues the maximization of economic benefits, aims for the highest production efficiency, earns the most profit, and maximizes consumption and demand to sell more products and achieve higher profits.

### **3.2. Ecological Reason**

Ecological reason, on the other hand, emphasizes achieving people's needs with as few resources as possible, using durable goods, and minimizing labor, capital, and natural resources to better satisfy those needs. [4] Ecological reason values the use value of products and requires adopting the best lifestyles and means to increase the usefulness and durability of products. It rejects false demands in consumption, advocating self-restraint to reduce consumption driven by false needs and recognizing and better satisfying genuine needs. Ecological reason requires the ecological transformation of both the capitalist system and human nature, shifting the focus from profit maximization to utility maximization. It also requires the relative independence of the state, culture, judiciary, speech, and even the economy to limit economic reason and carry out rational planning to achieve the goals of ecological reason.

The core concept of ecological reason is "less but better", It aims to build a society where people "live better with less labor and consumption", Ecological reason also requires the differentiation of labor activities. [4] Our society lacks labor that is economically purposeful and useful, labor that can be socialized, but not labor that does not conform to economic reason. What we need is labor that reveals man's self, rather than alienated labor. Furthermore, ecological reason not only values human worth but also highlights the intrinsic value of nature. It focuses on both the use value of nature as a production factor and the inherent value of nature itself. Ultimately, ecological reason seeks to achieve harmony and unity between humans and nature.

## **4. Solutions to the Ecological Crisis**

How to address the ecological crisis facing contemporary capitalist society and humanity as a whole? Gorz believes that this can be achieved through the socialist movement. This process involves downgrading the dominance of economic reason and aligning it with the essential needs of human beings to establish ecological reason. It also involves ecological restructuring of capitalism. Regarding this issue, André Gorz proposed measures from the following aspects:

### **4.1. Clarify the goals of the socialist movement to fully realize its potential**

Gorz emphasizes that the socialist movement has aimed from its inception to "restrict the economic reason that freely expresses itself in competition and market relations and make it serve a higher reason (namely ecological reason)." [5] Gorz suggests that we should understand socialism along the dimension of being a vision that promotes liberation and freedom rather than merely a different economic and social system. The goal of communism is to completely eliminate commodity relations, including wage system, and subsequently eliminate labor specialization and division of labor within larger economic spaces, as well as do away with macroeconomic and macro-social control and the state itself. In the present context, when the capitalist system threatens the natural foundations of life and even the meaning of life, transcending capitalism will become an urgent objective.

Currently, it is difficult to eliminate complex capitalism through violent revolution. Today's socialist movement should aim to secure more and more space for "the logic of life" within the existing system. Simultaneously, it should establish ecological directions and technologies in various aspects, gradually limit the space occupied by economic reason, and continuously guide and adjust the entire social system's transformation from economic reason to ecological reason. Thus, it can build a development model that transcends capitalism, starting from people's genuine needs and fully considering their desires and interests, which is socialism.

### **4.2. Establish sound economic policies to constrain economic reason**

Since the inception of capitalism, oppression and resistance have coexisted. In the struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie, capitalism has imposed a series of restrictions on economic reason due to both objective necessity and social pressure. For example, it has prohibited slavery, child labor, and established minimum wage standards. We need to establish clear norms and prerequisites for the operation of economic reason to make it serve society. The essence of the conflict between socialism and capitalism lies in the scope and extent of economic reason, rather than economic reason itself. The two fundamental principles at the core of limiting economic reason are the reconstruction of ecology and the expansion of the space for life and activities liberated from economic constraints. Around these two principles, Gorz discusses a series of specific measures to be adopted, such as prioritizing social goals

over capital accumulation, and the state taking responsibility for setting the framework and prerequisites for economic development in a way that aligns with people's desires. [4]

### **4.3. Undergo ecological reconstruction of capitalism**

Gorz argues that the fundamental conflict between socialism and capitalism lies not in economic reason itself but in the scope and breadth of economic reason. In a society where social relations are dominated by economic reason, where capital accumulation is at its core, and where economic reason and capital accumulation shape individual lives, activities, value systems, and culture, that society is capitalist. On the other hand, in a society where economic reason, in comparison to values and non-quantitative goals, plays a secondary role in shaping social relations and where economic reason is equally important as other activities in social and personal life, that society is socialist. Therefore, the core of the economic policy we should follow is to limit economic reason, rebuild ecological reason, and expand the space for life and activities liberated from economic constraints. [6]

To achieve ecological reason and socialism, capitalism must undergo ecological reconstruction or "ecological modernization." Ecological reconstruction must take place in various fields of capitalist society. In the field of product design, it entails ensuring that products are sustainable and easily repairable. Ecological reconstruction of industrial systems primarily focuses on heavy industry and resource-intensive industries, aiming to create "eco-friendly and balanced" industries while increasing the production of products beneficial to the consolidation of the ecological foundation (i.e., the environment) and reducing the production of products that threaten the natural foundations of life.

Moreover, technological innovation is necessary. Under capitalism, technological revolutions occur to gain a competitive advantage in the market and maximize profits. In other words, technological development under capitalism is subordinate to economic reason. We must ensure that technological innovation serves ecological reconstruction and ecological rationalization, aiming to improve resource utilization, labor productivity, and efficiency. Anything ecologically irrational in the production process will also be economically irrational.

## **5. Conclusion**

André Gorz's ideas about achieving the transition from capitalism to socialism through the socialist movement, which limits economic reason, may seem utopian in practical society. However, Gorz's thoughts on solving the ecological crisis, the "less but better" ecological reason, the reconstruction of today's economically dominant society, and the ideas related to harmony between humans and nature and the liberation of humans and nature within socialist society have valuable inspirational significance for socialist construction.

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