

The BP Oil Spill:  
Economy versus Ecology

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The Gulf of Mexico oil spill on April 20, 2010 is a striking example of the conflict between two sciences, economy and ecology—both rooted in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning home or household. Economy is the management of the household, ecology the study of the household. The two ideas were presciently connected by German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 when he noted that biologists had neglected “the relations of the organism to the environment, the place each organism takes in the household of nature, in the economy of all nature. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

BP’s deep-well technology is an experiment with Nature gone deadly. It exemplifies the contained, controlled experiment—developed during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century—that depends on isolating the factors under investigation from any environmental conditions that might interfere with the results, or in this case the profits. Mechanistic science as the ideology of capitalism allows for the maximization of profits at the expense of nature. As Karl Marx put it in the 1860s, “natural elements entering into production” are the “free gift of Nature to capital.”<sup>2</sup> BP took this free gift, confined it in well-casings, capped it with a “fail-safe” blow-out preventor, and sucked up the profits created by fossilized nature. Francis Bacon in the 1620s saw it as Nature in bonds. “She is put in constraint, moulded, and made as it were new by art and the hand of man,” he wrote. The goal was “the enlarging of the bounds of human empire. to the effecting of all things possible.”<sup>3</sup> In the effort to fulfill Bacon’s vision, BP blew it.

With the blow-out, Nature is in revolt; economy at odds with ecology.<sup>4</sup> The earth’s household has been mismanaged; its study incomplete. The problem as BP has tragically and belatedly discovered is that Nature as an active force cannot be so confined. The pressures created by deep sea oil cannot be contained in mechanized, engineered systems isolated from the environment. The closed mechanical system, according to chaos theorists, is the unusual; unpredictable, chaotic events the usual.<sup>5</sup> Ecological systems are open systems in which matter and energy flow across boundaries. Oil moved by ocean currents and winds flows across the boundaries, booms, and berms placed by BP in its vain effort to contain its spread. Plankton, corals, and fish are deprived of life-sustaining oxygen; fishers, oil workers, and chefs of life-sustaining work. Everywhere life and death are in a struggle to maintain the *oikos*.

In response to the 1969 Union Oil spill in Santa Barbara, California, thousands of demonstrators protested the unchecked power of “big oil.” Environmental activists and the New Left came together to articulate a critique of Capital versus Nature, Economy versus Ecology.<sup>6</sup> Where is that critique today? Where is the Left? Where is the coalition

of students, environmental groups, and critics of global capitalism? The opportunity to push hard against global warming and for alternative energy, alternative transportation, and alternative economies is slipping away. The *oikos*, our planetary home, is at stake.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1866), vol. 2: 286-87; English translation in Robert C. Stauffer, "Haeckel, Darwin, and Ecology," *Quarterly Review of Biology* (1957), 32: 138-144, see pp. 140-141.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. Ernest Untermann and ed. Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), vol. 3:745.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis Scientiarum, Works*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Devon Heath, 14 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1875), vol. 4, p. 294 and *New Atlantis, Works*, vol. 3, p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 92-127.

<sup>5</sup> James Gleick, *Chaos: The Making of a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance:' The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 90, no. 2 (Sept 2003): 525-554; Roderick Nash, ed., *The American Environment: Readings in the History of Conservation* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1976).