The twentieth century ended against a backdrop of global general crisis. The capitalist mode of production was extended to the ends of the Earth and gradually subjected all human activities to the reign of the commodity. However, for the first time in its history no doubt, it produced two simultaneous, major regressions. The first was social, for, despite a significant increase in the amount of wealth being created, poverty and misery are not on the decrease: 1.3 billion human beings dispose of the equivalent of less than a dollar a day; as many have no access to drinking water or the most elementary health care; 850 million are illiterate; 800 million are undernourished; at least 100 million children are exploited at work; and, during the last four decades, the inequalities between the richest twenty per cent and the poorest twenty per cent have progressed from 30 to 1 to 80 to 1. This social disaster affects even the richest countries, since the United States contains 34.5 million people living beneath the poverty line and the OECD countries include 34 million people suffering from hunger, 36 million reduced to unemployment, and many more whose situation is becoming insecure.
The second major regression involved nature and eco-systems, which were seriously affected or threatened by the exhaustion of certain non-renewable resources and pollution of every sort. Moreover, the bulk of scientific opinion concurred in taking fright at the risk of global warming bound up with the emission of greenhouse gases. The origin of this ecological crisis is unquestionably the industrial mode of development pursued without any other evaluative criterion than the maximum profitability of the capital employed, but whose legitimacy is ensured by the ideology according to which increased production and consumption are synonymous with an improvement in well-being from which all the planet’s inhabitants will sooner or later benefit.

If it can be established that the simultaneous advent of these two types of disaster, social and ecological, is not fortuitous – or that they are the result of the economic development stimulated by capital accumulation on a planetary scale and, worse still, if they are its inevitable outcome – then the question of an encounter between the Marxist critique of capitalism and the critique of productivism dear to ecologists is posed. Now, not only were these two critiques born separately, but they have largely developed in opposition one another in so far as the first was identified throughout their existence with the experience of the so-called ‘socialist’ countries, whose ecological depredations – like their social depredations – were equivalent to that of the capitalist countries, while the second critique long hesitated to resituate humanity’s relationship with nature in the framework of social relations.

However, the conjunction of three events has created the conditions for a rapprochement between the two approaches. First of all, there is the disappearance of the ‘socialist’ (anti-)models that handicapped the use of Marx’s theory for the purposes of a radical critique of capitalism. The second is the complete liberalisation of capitalism, under the supervision of globalised financial markets, which ended in a reversal in the balance of forces to the advantage of capital and the detriment of labour. The third event is the convergence of popular mobilisations and social struggles against the ravages of capitalist globalisation, particularly by clearly identifying what is at stake in negotiations within the World Trade Organisation. Rejection of the commodification of the world and of the privatisation of living beings in itself contains a challenge to the two terms of the crisis – social and ecological – striking the worst-off populations with especial severity.