
ESSAY

What Is Ecosocialism?

Michael Löwy

Translated by Eric Canepa

The reigning capitalist system is bringing the planet's inhabitants a long list of irreparable calamities. Witness: exponential growth of air pollution in big cities and across rural landscapes; fouled drinking water; global warming, with the incipient melting of the polar ice caps and the increase of "natural" extreme weather-related catastrophes; the deterioration of the ozone layer; the increasing destruction of tropical rain forests; the rapid decrease of biodiversity through the extinction of thousands of species; the exhausting of the soil; desertification; the unmanageable accumulation of waste, especially nuclear; the multiplication of nuclear accidents along with the threat of a new—and perhaps more destructive—Chernobyl; food contamination, genetic engineering, "mad cow," and hormone-injected beef. All the warning signs are red: it is clear that the insatiable quest for profits, the productivist and mercantile logic of capitalist/industrial civilization is leading us into an ecological disaster of incalculable proportions. This is not to give in to "catastrophism" but to verify that the dynamic of infinite "growth" brought about by capitalist expansion is threatening the natural foundations of human life on the planet.

How should we react to this danger? Socialism and ecology—or at least some of its currents—share objective goals that imply a questioning of this economic automatism, of the reign of quantification, of production as a goal in itself, of the dictatorship of money, of the reduction of the social universe to the calculations of profitability and the needs of capital accumulation. Both socialism and ecology appeal to qualitative values—for the socialists, use-value, the satisfaction of needs, social equality; for the ecologists, protecting nature and ecological balance. Both conceive of the economy as "embedded" in the environment—a social environment or a natural environment.

That said, basic differences have until now separated the "reds" from the "greens," the Marxists from the ecologists. Ecologists accuse Marx and Engels of productivism. Is this justified? Yes and no.

No, to the extent that no one has denounced the capitalist logic of production for production's sake—as well as the accumulation of capital, wealth, and commodities as

goals in themselves—as vehemently as Marx did. The very idea of socialism—contrary to its miserable bureaucratic deformations—is that of production of use-values, of goods necessary to the satisfaction of human needs. For Marx, the supreme goal of technical progress is not the infinite accumulation of goods (“having”) but the reduction of the working day and the accumulation of free time (“being”).

Yes, to the extent that one often sees in Marx and Engels (and all the more in later Marxism) a tendency to make the “development of the productive forces” the principal vector of progress, along with an insufficiently critical attitude toward industrial civilization, notably in its destructive relationship to the environment.

In reality, one can find material in the writings of Marx and Engels to support both interpretations. The ecological issue is, in my opinion, the great challenge for a renewal of Marxist thought at the threshold of the 21st century. It requires that Marxists undertake a deep critical revision of their traditional conception of “productive forces,” and that they break radically with the ideology of linear progress and with the technological and economic paradigm of modern industrial civilization.

* * * *

Walter Benjamin was one of the first Marxists in the 20th century to articulate this question. In 1928, in his book *One-Way Street*, he denounced as an “imperialist doctrine” the idea of the domination of nature and proposed a new conception of technology as a “mastery of the relations between nature and humanity.” Some years later in *On the Concept of History*, he proposed enriching historical materialism with the ideas of Fourier, that utopian visionary who dreamt of “labor, which, far from exploiting nature, would be capable of awakening the creations that slept in its womb.”

Today Marxism is still far from having made up for its backwardness in this regard. Nevertheless, certain lines of thinking are beginning to tackle the problem. A fertile trail has been opened up by the American ecologist and “Marxist-Polanyist,” James O’Connor. He proposes that we add to Marx’s first contradiction of capitalism—that between the forces and relations of production—a second contradiction—that between productive forces and conditions of production—which takes into account workers, urban space, and nature. Through its expansionist dynamic, O’Connor points out, capital endangers or destroys its own conditions, beginning with the natural environment—a possibility that Marx did not adequately consider.

Another interesting approach is one suggested in a recent piece by the Italian “ecomarxist,” Tiziano Bagarollo: “The formula according to which there is a transformation of potentially productive forces into effectively destructive ones, above all in regard to the environment, seems more appropriate and meaningful than the well-known scheme of the contradiction between (dynamic) forces of production and relations of production (that are fetters on the former). Moreover, this formula provides a critical, non-apologetic, foundation for economic, technological, and

scientific development and therefore the elaboration of a “differentiated” (Ernst Bloch) concept of progress.”

Whether Marxist or not, the traditional labor movement in Europe—unions, social-democratic and communist parties—remains profoundly shaped by the ideology of “progress” and productivism, even leading it, in certain cases, without asking too many questions, to the defense of nuclear energy or the automobile industry. However, ecological sensitivity has begun to emerge, notably in the trade unions and left parties of the Nordic countries, Spain, and Germany.

* * * *

The great contribution of ecology has been, and still is, to make us conscious of the dangers threatening the planet as a result of the present mode of production and consumption. The exponential growth of attacks on the environment and the increasing threat of the breakdown of the ecological balance constitute a catastrophic scenario that calls into question the survival of the human species. We are facing a crisis of civilization that demands radical change.

The problem is that the proposals put forward by the leading circles of European political ecology are, at best, highly inadequate and at worst, wholly inappropriate solutions to the ecological crisis. Their main weakness is that they do not acknowledge the necessary connection between productivism and capitalism. Instead, reforms like eco-taxes capable of controlling “excesses” or ideas like “green economics” lead to the illusion of a “clean capitalism.” Or, further, taking as a pretext the imitation of Western productivism by bureaucratic command economies, they conceive of capitalism and “socialism” as variants of the same model—an argument that has lost a lot of its attraction after the collapse of so-called “actually existing socialism.”

Ecologists are mistaken if they imagine they can do without the Marxian critique of capitalism. An ecology that does not recognize the relation between “productivism” and the logic of profit is destined to fail—or, worse, to become absorbed by the system. Examples abound. The lack of a coherent anti-capitalist posture led most of the European Green parties—notably, in France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium—to become mere “eco-reformist” partners in the social-liberal management of capitalism by center-left governments.

Regarding workers as irremediably devoted to productivism, certain ecologists have avoided the labor movement and have adopted the slogan “neither left nor right.” Ex-Marxists converted to ecology hastily say “goodbye to the working class” (André Gorz), while others (Alain Lipietz) insist on the need to abandon “the red”—that is, Marxism or socialism—to join “the green,” the new paradigm thought to be the answer to all economic and social problems.

Finally, in so-called “fundamentalist,” or deep-ecology circles, we see, under the pretext of opposing anthropocentrism, a rejection of humanism, which leads to relativist positions that place all living species on the same plane. Should one really

maintain that *Koch's bacillus* or the *Anopheles* mosquito have the same right to life as a child suffering from tuberculosis or malaria?

What then is ecosocialism? It is a current of ecological thought and action that appropriates the fundamental gains of Marxism while shaking off its productivist dross. For ecosocialists, the market's profit logic, and the logic of bureaucratic authoritarianism within the late departed "actually existing socialism," are incompatible with the need to safeguard the natural environment. While criticizing the ideology of the dominant sectors of the labor movement, ecosocialists know that the workers and their organizations are an indispensable force for any radical transformation of the system as well as the establishment of a new socialist and ecological society.

Ecosocialism developed mostly during the last 30 years, thanks to the work of major thinkers like Raymond Williams, Rudolf Bahro (in his earlier writings) and André Gorz (also in his early work), as well as the very useful contributions of James O'Connor, Barry Commoner, John Bellamy Foster, Joel Kovel, Joan Martínez-Alier, Francisco Fernández Buey, Jorge Riechman (the latter three from Spain), Jean-Paul Déléage, Jean-Marie Harribey (France), Elmar Altvater, Frieder Otto Wolf (Germany), and many others, who publish in journals like *Capitalism Nature Socialism* and *Ecología Política*.

This current is far from politically homogeneous. Still, most of its representatives share certain common themes. Breaking with the productivist ideology of progress—in its capitalist and/or bureaucratic form—and opposed to the infinite expansion of a mode of production and consumption that destroys nature, it represents an original attempt to connect the fundamental ideas of Marxian socialism to the gains of critical ecology.

James O'Connor defines as ecosocialist the theories and movements that seek to subordinate exchange-value to use-value, by organizing production as a function of social needs and the requirements of environmental protection. Their aim, an ecological socialism, would be an ecologically rational society founded on democratic control, social equality, and the predominance of use-value. I would add that this conception assumes collective ownership of the means of production, democratic planning that makes it possible for society to define the goals of investment and production, and a new technological structure of the productive forces.

Ecosocialist reasoning rests on two essential arguments:

1. The present mode of production and consumption of advanced capitalist countries, which is based on the logic of boundless accumulation (of capital, profits, and commodities), waste of resources, ostentatious consumption, and the accelerated destruction of the environment, cannot in any way be extended to the whole planet without a major ecological crisis. According to recent calculations, if one extended to the whole world the average energy consumption of the United States, the known reserves of petroleum would be exhausted in nineteen days. Thus, this system necessarily operates on the maintenance and aggravation of the glaring inequality between North and South.

2. Whatever the cause, the continuation of capitalist “progress” and the expansion of a civilization based on a market economy—even under this brutally inequitable form in which the world’s majority consume less—directly threatens, in the middle term (any exact forecast would be risky), the very survival of the human species. The protection of the natural environment is thus a humanist imperative.

Rationality limited by the capitalist market, with its short-sighted calculation of profit and loss, stands in intrinsic contradiction to ecological rationality, which takes into account the length of natural cycles. It is not a matter of contrasting “bad” ecocidal capitalists to “good” green capitalists; it is the system itself, based on ruthless competition, the demands of profitability, and the race for rapid profit, which is the destroyer of nature’s balance. Would-be green capitalism is nothing but a publicity stunt, a label for the purpose of selling a commodity, or—in the best of cases—a local initiative equivalent to a drop of water on the arid soil of the capitalist desert.

Against commodity fetishism and the reified autonomisation of the economy brought about by neoliberalism, the challenge of the future for ecosocialists is the realization of a “moral economy.” This moral economy must exist in the sense in which E. P. Thompson used this term, that is, an economic policy founded on non-monetary and extra-economic criteria. In other words, it must reintegrate the economic into the ecological, the social, and the political.

Partial reforms are completely inadequate; what is needed is the replacement of the micro-rationality of profit by a social and ecological macro-rationality, which demands a veritable change of civilization. That is impossible without a profound technological reorientation aimed at the replacement of present energy sources by other non-polluting and renewable ones, such as wind or solar energy. The first question, therefore, concerns control over the means of production, especially decisions on investment and technological change, which must be taken away from the banks and capitalist enterprises in order to serve society’s common good.

Admittedly, radical change concerns not only production but consumption as well. However, the problem of bourgeois/industrial civilization is not—as ecologists often assert—the population’s “excessive consumption.” Nor is the solution a general “limit” on consumption. It is, rather, the prevalent *type* of consumption, based as it is on ostentation, waste, mercantile alienation, and an accumulationist obsession, that must be called into question.

An economy in transition to socialism, “re-embedded” (as Karl Polanyi would say) in the social and natural environment, would be founded on the democratic choice of priorities and investments by the population itself, and not by “the laws of the market” or an omniscient politburo. Local, national, and, sooner or later, international, democratic planning, would define:

- what products are to be subsidized or even distributed without charge;

- what energy options are to be pursued, even if they are not, in the beginning, the most profitable;
- how to reorganize the transportation system according to social and ecological criteria; and
- what measures to take to repair, as quickly as possible, the enormous environmental damage bequeathed to us by capitalism. And so on . . .

This transition would lead not only to a new mode of production and an egalitarian and democratic society, but also to an alternative mode of life, a new ecosocialist civilization, beyond the reign of money, beyond consumption habits artificially produced by advertising, and beyond the unlimited production of commodities, such as private automobiles, that are harmful to the environment.

Utopia? In its etymological sense (“nowhere”), certainly. However, if one does not believe, with Hegel, that “everything that is real is rational, and everything that is rational is real,” how does one reflect on substantial rationality without appealing to utopias? Utopia is indispensable to social change, provided it is based on the contradictions found in reality and on real social movements. This is true of ecosocialism, which proposes a strategic alliance between “reds” and “greens”—not in the narrow sense used by politicians applied to social-democratic and green parties, but in the broader sense between the labor movement and the ecological movement—and the movements of solidarity with the oppressed and exploited of the South.

This alliance implies that ecology gives up any tendency to anti-humanist naturalism and abandons its claim to have replaced the critique of political economy. From the other side, Marxism needs to overcome its productivism. One way of seeing this would be to discard the mechanistic scheme of the opposition between the forces of production and the relations of production, which impede them. This should be replaced or—at least, be completed—by the idea that productive forces in the capitalist system become destructive ones. Take, for example, the armament industry, or the various branches of production that are destructive of human health and of the natural environment.

* * * *

The revolutionary utopia of green socialism, or of solar communism, does not imply that one ought not to act right now. Not having illusions about “ecologizing” capitalism does not mean that one cannot join the battle for immediate reforms. For example, certain kinds of eco-taxes could be useful, providing they are based on an egalitarian social logic (make the polluters pay, not the public) and that one disposes of the economic-calculation myth of “market price” for ecological damages, which are incommensurate with any monetary point of view. We desperately need to win time, to struggle immediately for the banning of the HCFCs that are destroying the ozone layer, for a moratorium on genetically modified organisms, for severe limitations on the emissions of greenhouse gases, and to privilege public transportation over the polluting and anti-social private automobile.

The trap awaiting us here is the formal acknowledgement of our demands, which empties them of content. An exemplary case is that of the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, which provides for a minimal reduction of 5 percent of gases responsible for global warming in relation to 1990—certainly too little to achieve any results. As is known, the U.S., the main power responsible for the emission of these gases, has stubbornly refused to sign the protocol. As for Europe, Japan and Canada, they have signed the protocol while adding clauses such as the famous “market of rights of emission,” which enormously restrict the treaty’s already limited reach. Rather than the long-term interests of humanity, it is the short-term view of the oil multinationals and the automobile industry that has predominated.

The struggle for ecosocial reforms can be the vehicle for dynamic change, a “transition” between minimal demands and the maximal program, provided one rejects the pressure and arguments of the ruling interests for “competitiveness” and “modernization” in the name of the “rules of the market.”

Certain immediate demands have already, or could rapidly, become the locus of a convergence between social and ecological movements, trade unions and defenders of the environment, “reds” and “greens:”

- the promotion of inexpensive or free public transportation—trains, metros, buses, trams—as an alternative to the choking and pollution of cities and countrysides by private automobiles and the trucking system;
- the rejection of the system of debt and extreme neoliberal “structural adjustments” imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on the countries of the South, with dramatic social and ecological consequences: massive unemployment, destruction of social protections, and destruction of natural resources through export;
- the defense of public health against the pollution of the air, water and food, due to the greed of large capitalist enterprises; and
- the reduction of work time to cope with unemployment and create a society that privileges free time over the accumulation of goods.

All of the emancipatory social movements must be brought together to birth a new civilization that is more humane and respectful of nature. As Jorge Riechmann says so aptly: “This project cannot reject any of the colors of the rainbow—neither the red of the anti-capitalist and egalitarian labor movement, nor the violet of the struggles for women’s liberation, nor the white of non-violent movements for peace, nor the anti-authoritarian black of the libertarians and anarchists, and even less the green of the struggle for a just and free humanity on a habitable planet.”

* * * *

Radical political ecology has become a social and political force present on the terrain of most European countries, and also, to a certain extent, in the U.S. However, nothing would be more wrong than to regard ecological questions as only of concern to

the countries of the North—a luxury of rich societies. Increasingly, social movements with an ecological dimension are developing in the countries of peripheral capitalism—the South.

These movements are reacting to a growing aggravation of the ecological problems of Asia, Africa and Latin America that result from a deliberate policy of “pollution export” by the imperialist countries. The economic “legitimation”—from the point of view of capitalist market economy—was bluntly articulated in an internal World Bank memo by the institution’s chief economist, Lawrence Summers (currently the president of Harvard University) in *The Economist* in early 1992. Summers said:

Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]? I can think of three reasons: 1) The measurement of the costs of health-impairing pollution depends on the forgone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health-impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that. 2) The costs of pollution are likely to be non-linear as the initial increments of pollution probably have very low costs. I’ve always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. . . . 3) The demand for a clean environment for aesthetic and health reasons is likely to have very high income-elasticity. The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under-five mortality is 200 per thousand. . .¹

In this statement we see a cynical formulation that clearly reveals the logic of global capital—in contrast to all the mollifying speeches on “development” produced by the international financial institutions.

In the countries of the South, we thus see the birth of movements which Joan Martínez-Alier calls “the ecology of the poor” or even “ecological neo-narodnism.” These include popular mobilizations in defense of peasant agriculture, communal access to natural resources threatened with destruction by the aggressive expansion of the market (or the state), as well as struggles against the degradation of the local environment caused by unequal exchange, dependent industrialization, genetic modifications and the development of capitalism (agribusiness) in the countryside. Often these movements do not define themselves as ecological, but their struggle nevertheless has a crucial ecological dimension.

¹*The Economist*, Feb. 8, 1992.

It goes without saying that these movements are not against the improvements brought by technological progress; on the contrary, the demand for electricity, running water, sewage, and more medical dispensaries are prominent in their platforms. What they reject is the pollution and destruction of their natural surroundings in the name of “market laws” and the imperatives of capitalist “expansion.”

A recent article by the Peruvian peasant leader Hugo Blanco is a striking articulation of the meaning of this “ecology of the poor:”

At first sight, the defenders of the environment or the conservationists appear as nice people, slightly crazy, whose principal aim in life is to prevent the disappearance of blue whales and panda bears. The common people have more important things occupying them, for example how to get their daily bread. However, there are in Peru a great many people who are defenders of the environment. To be sure, if one told them “you are ecologists,” they would probably reply “ecologist my eye.” And yet, in their struggle against the pollution caused by the Southern Peru Copper Corporation, are not the inhabitants of the town of Ilo and the surrounding villages defenders of the environment? And is not the population of the Amazon completely ecologist, ready to die to defend their forests against pillage? The same goes for the poor population of Lima, when they protest against water pollution.

Among the innumerable manifestations of the “ecology of the poor,” one movement is particularly exemplary, by its breadth, which is at once social and ecological, local and global, “red” and “green:” the struggle of Chico Mendes and the Forest People Alliance in defense of the Brazilian Amazon against the destructive activity of the large landowners and of multinational agribusiness.

Let us briefly recall the main aspects of this confrontation. In the early 1980s, a militant trade-unionist linked to the Unified Workers Confederation (CUT) and partisan of the new socialist movement represented by the Brazilian Workers Party, Chico Mendes organized occupations of land by peasants who earned their livelihoods from rubber tapping (*seringueiros*) against the *latifundistas* who bulldozed the forest in order to establish pasture lands. Later Mendes succeeded in bringing together peasants, agricultural workers, *seringueiros*, trade unionists and indigenous tribes—with the support of the church’s base communities—to form the Forest People Alliance, which blocked many attempts at deforestation. The international outcry resulting from these actions earned him the United Nations Global 500 Prize in 1987. But shortly afterwards, in December of 1988, the *latifundistas* made him pay dearly for his struggle by having him killed by paid assassins.

Through its linking of socialism and ecology, peasant and indigenous struggles, survival of local populations and taking responsibility for a global concern (the protection of the last great tropical rainforest), this movement can become a paradigm of future popular mobilizations in the South.

Today, at the turn of the 20th century, radical political ecology has become one of the most important ingredients of the vast movement against capitalist neoliberal globalization, which is developing in the North as well as the South. The massive presence of ecologists was one of the striking aspects of the big demonstration in Seattle against the World Trade Organization in 1999. And at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, one of the most powerful symbolic acts of the event was the operation led by activists of the Landless Movement and José Bové's French Farmer's Confederation: the digging up of a field of Monsanto's genetically modified corn. The battle against the uncontrolled spread of genetically modified food is mobilizing in Brazil, France and other countries. This struggle brings together not only the ecological movement but also the farmers' movement, part of the left, and members of the general public who are disturbed by the unforeseeable consequences of genetic modification on public health and the natural environment. The struggle against the commodification of the world and the defense of the environment, resistance to the dictatorship of multinationals, and the battle for ecology are intimately linked in the reflection and praxis of the world movement against capitalist/liberal globalization.