

A short talk on Left Biocentrism

By David Orton

These are the notes from a talk I gave at a San Francisco conference "Is Capitalism Soon Over?" (October 6-8, 2008) hosted by the International Forum on Globalization. There were over 30 invited participants. The conference was organized by Jerry Mander of the IFG, and Doug Tompkins of the Foundation for Deep Ecology. The conference included speakers like Richard Heinberg, Helena Norberg-Hodge, David Korten, Joel Kovel and Saral Sarkar. People did not only come from the US but also from Chile, South Africa, England, China and Germany. There were four people from Canada in attendance: Maude Barlow, Tony Clark, Ian Whyte and myself. I saw the theme of the conference as an attempt to bring together an ecocentric deep ecology perspective with anti-capitalism. This theme is extremely relevant for any deeper Green politics in Canada. Below are my notes for a ten to twelve minute talk on left biocentrism, which was my allotted time slot in a panel discussion.

“The earth does not belong to humans.” Arne Naess

“I believe that the ecological crisis will bring about the end of capitalism.”
Rudolf Bahro (1935-1997).

The deep ecology philosophy, within which left biocentrism is embedded, was initially outlined and summarized in the early 1970s by the Norwegian philosopher and environmental activist Arne Naess in a widely reprinted anti-capitalist article, called “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” Much has been written on deep ecology since then by Naess and others. I myself adopted this philosophy in 1985. Part of this meant to try to follow a low consumption lifestyle. (I have struggled unsuccessfully, it seems, around food intake.) One of my favourite quotes from Naess, on referring to Western consumption, says:

We must live at a level that we seriously can wish others to attain, not at a level that requires the bulk of humanity NOT to reach. (**Philosophical Dialogues**, edited by Witoszek and Brennan, p. 224)

Saral Sarkar, in his book **Eco-socialism or Eco-capitalism**, makes a similar point when he stated that the ecology movement is the first social movement in history to promise a lower material standard of living. This would seem to make green electoralism a non-starter!

Left biocentrism made room for those who did not see themselves as socialists, yet shared a basic anti-capitalist perspective. From the beginning of the conceptualization of left biocentrism, “left” was consciously viewed in an inclusive manner. As we say in the Left Biocentrism Primer “Left’ as used in left biocentrism, means anti-industrial and anti-capitalist, but not necessarily socialist.” Thus some left biocentrists consider themselves socialists, as I do myself, while others do not.

This left biocentric tendency represents a left focus within the deep ecology movement. Social, political, and economic questions, as well as the protection of wilderness and wildlife, and the defense of forests and marine life, are part of this left biocentric agenda. There is a major concern

with social justice. Other tendencies, like social ecology, ecological Marxism or ecofeminism, while raising important questions, are not biocentric or ecocentric but remain human-centered in their fundamental orientation. Ecology is not their core value, and humans occupy center stage in their ethical universe. We can, of course, cooperate on an anti-capitalist basis.

The interplay and contradictions between an acceptance of deep ecology and this left consciousness – i.e. the interplay between the Green and the Red – has been a focus of much of my writings, in articles, book reviews and internet discussions.

Left biocentrism emerged out of several parallel anti-capitalist tendencies in the green and environmental movements, which sought to bring together deep ecology and a Left perspective: "deep green theory" (Richard Sylvan); "socialist biocentrism" (Helga Hoffmann and David Orton); "ecologism" (Andrew Dobson); "radical ecocentrism" (Andrew McLaughlin, see his 1993 book **Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology**); "revolutionary ecology" (Judi Bari); and "green fundamentalism" (Rudolf Bahro). Another person who should be mentioned is Fred Bender (see his 2003 book, **The Culture Of Extinction: Toward A Philosophy Of Deep Ecology**).

As a theoretical perspective, left biocentrism is becoming better known among green ecocentric activists and in academic circles with an interest in ecophilosophy. There are now quite a number of articles discussing left biocentrism, i.e. on the internet (both theoretical and applied to particular issues) and in printed publications, like the US-based **Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought**, from 2002 onwards and **Canadian Dimension**, from 1989 onwards. There are also some books which discuss left biocentrism, (such as **Sustainability: The Challenge**, the **Encyclopedia Of Religion And Nature**, and Patrick Curry's **Ecological Ethics**). The third and subsequent editions of the undergraduate reader **Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology** notes "the emergence of a 'left biocentrism.'" John Clark, in the Political Ecology section of this reader, says of left biocentrism: it "combines a theoretical commitment to deep ecology with a radical decentralist anti-capitalist politics having much in common with social ecology." As well, there are a number of people who identify themselves as left biocentrists or "left bios" and who are now writing articles as left biocentrists, for example in the new online journal [**Dandelion Times: A Left Biocentric Journal**](#).

Although in the past I have been the main theoretical exponent of left biocentrism, others have contributed to my understanding and helped shape my ideas. A left bio discussion group on the internet, functioning for over ten years, has been one forum for this collective input. Mine has really been a collective intellectual endeavour. (The 1998 ten-point [**Left Biocentrism Primer**](#), was the result of an extended collective discussion, which then became a basis of agreement for those joining the discussion group.)

For left biocentrists like myself, industrialism, not capitalism, is seen as the main problem. This is not to deny the capitalist imperative of endless growth and consumerism, without respect for ecological limits. Industrialism can have a capitalist or a socialist face. It was Andrew McLaughlin

who first conceptualized this position regarding industrialism from a deep ecology (and socialist) perspective.

The Left, no matter past myriad forms, has politically always been associated with social justice for the human species. This is its universal symbolism. The use of the description “left” as a qualifier to biocentrism is meant to send a signal that the future biocentric society will also be socially just for humans, in addition to being just for other species and the planet itself. Yet ecological justice must remain primary. There is no justice for people on a dead planet. We are first Earthlings in personal and societal consciousness, as the late Canadian eco-philosopher Stan Rowe frequently reminded us, and humans second. But activists who support left biocentrism must also be involved in social justice issues.

I have written critically about deep ecology and that much of this writing was obscure and not relevant to practical green work. I raised that there was a lack of any real political, economic or social analysis, or class perspective, by most deep ecology writers. In many ways, academics turned deep ecology inwards and away from changing this world. The Canadian deep ecology magazine **The Trumpeter** is an example of this long-standing academic obscurity. Left biocentrists have a social conflict view of social change, indebted to Marxism (Sigmund Kvaloy of Norway has developed this perspective), not one of social harmony as advocated by Naess and many mainstream deep ecology writers.

While the Left stresses collective ownership, as opposed to individual ownership, it does not normally challenge the idea of “ownership” itself – that is, the human-centered idea that the human species can “own” nature itself and other species. Yet nature can be destroyed, whether under state, collective, private, or indigenous “ownership.” Left biocentrism has a non-human centered view, where it would be more accurate to say that the Earth owns us. For left biocentrists, community has to include not just humans but other animals, plants and the Earth itself. With such a community, there is a sense of Earth spirituality, as in past animistic indigenous societies, where it acted as a restraint upon human exploitation of nature. This spirituality has to be brought back for sustainability to be achieved. Left biocentric theory advocates “usufruct” as opposed to private ownership of the natural world. With usufruct, there is the right of responsible use of the natural world but not ownership of any part of Gaia. We are also subject to ecocentric governance, which is much wider and more demanding than the governance by human society. There is no “right” to destroy or despoil the natural world for narrow human self-interest. Nature remains a commons. It should not be privatized and subject to individual or collective ownership.

For us, the economy does not just include the long term welfare of humans and their habitats, but it also includes preserving and not significantly altering conditions for the long term welfare of all the other species of life inhabiting the planet. We humans must share a fixed amount of physical habitat, whether land or marine, with other species on an equality basis. A population reduction strategy must therefore be part of any green economic policy. For the ecocentric Left informed by deep ecology, there is the primacy of ecocentric consciousness – of “thinking like a mountain”, as Aldo Leopold instructed us. Social justice, while important, is secondary to such a consciousness. The left-right distinction is therefore subordinate to the anthropocentric-deep ecology divide.

Humans have to come into a new non-dominant relationship with the natural world, where Nature, e.g. forests and wildlife, are not assumed to be “resources” for humans and corporate consumption. The use of this type of language implies a human-centered world view, as in industrial forestry, where insects are “pests”, and trees are “fibre” which can be described as “decadent” or “over-mature”, or as “weed” species if there is no commercial utilization.

Left biocentrism supporters see some contradictions as primary, and others as secondary. From this perspective, the primary contradiction is with industrial capitalist society and its Earth-destructive anthropocentric world view and practices. Secondary contradictions are differences which are firmly held beliefs on various other issues.

Left biocentrism is open to learning from the Left, yet it differentiates itself as a separate theoretical tendency, with a number of criticisms of the traditional Left. I see myself first as Earth-centered, but also as part of the Canadian Left. My main sympathies, concerning human-centered politics, are on the communist/socialist side, not on the side of capitalism and its adherents.

At this time of ecocide, left biocentrism has a lot to offer a Left which is open to its message. I believe this theoretical tendency, which has evolved to merge deep ecology and social justice, is part of the path forward to an ecocentric and socially just post-industrial society.

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Last updated October 31, 2008
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