

Left Biocentrism

By David Orton

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(This entry was agreed upon after discussion among members of the internet group Leftbio.)

Left biocentrism or left ecocentrism (the two terms are used interchangeably), is a theoretical tendency which has been unfolding within the deep ecology movement since the mid-1980s. It has been called "the left wing" of the deep ecology movement. Left biocentrists (left bios) support the ecocentric eight-point Deep Ecology Platform drawn up by Arne Naess and George Sessions. They see this Platform as a key component of the existing deep ecology movement, which should therefore not be subject to unilateral changes by any individual deep ecologist. Necessary changes to the Platform, so that it can evolve, must be sorted out collectively within the movement. Left bios see their work as endeavoring to strengthen the deep ecology movement. "Left" as used by left biocentrists, means anti-capitalist and anti-industrialist, but not necessarily socialist. Industrialism is seen as having a capitalist or a socialist face. The future economic and political organization of an ecocentric society is seen as a subject of necessary and ongoing discussions.

Many left biocentrists (myself included) came to this perspective from a left-wing background. As we became aware of deep ecology we saw the importance of moving beyond the human-centered values (anthropocentrism) of the anarchist, social democratic, communist, and socialist traditions, and became aware of the need to put the Earth first. This meant to identify and express solidarity with all life. Some within this group of people had been working on a broadly defined "left" deep ecology path, but were using different names to describe it, e.g. "deep green theory" (Richard Sylvan), "radical ecocentrism" (Andrew McLaughlin), "revolutionary ecology" (Judi Bari), "green fundamentalism" (Rudolf Bahro), "revolutionary ecocentrism" (Ken Wu), etc. All these left deep ecology supporters, and others not mentioned, would believe that although deep ecology pointed us in the needed new philosophical direction, it had yet to evolve a practical political program in opposition to industrial capitalism.

Others drawn to left biocentrism were responding to the theoretical and practical work done in its name, or were drawn to it because they were opposed to the "accommodating" stance of much deep ecology toward industrial capitalism. The influence of the internet has been important, not only for the dissemination and exchange of writings, but also for making possible a "left bio" discussion group, which in 1998 collectively produced a ten-point Left Biocentrism Primer. The Primer provides a starting point for left biocentrism, but it is also a work in progress, like that of deep ecology itself.

Left bios believe that the Earth belongs to no one and should be a non-privatized Commons. They call for a global redistribution of wealth, oppose economic growth and consumerism, and practice voluntary simplicity. There is a bioregional not a global focus. Social ecology, eco-Marxism, and ecofeminism have important insights, left bios believe, but are nevertheless seen as unduly human-centered in orientation.

To facilitate collaboration left bios distinguish between "primary" and "secondary" contradictions. The primary contradiction resides in anthropocentric industrial capitalist society. Secondary contradictions over other issues, such as vegetarianism, remain but are accepted so that people can unite and focus on the primary contradiction.

Spirituality is also critical in left biocentrism. Point six of the Primer states:

Left biocentrism holds that individual and collective spiritual transformation is important to bring about major social change, and to break with industrial society. We need inward transformation, so that the interests of all species override the short-term self-interest of the individual, the family, the community, and the nation.

Left biocentrists believe that, in order to try and turn around the ecological "Armageddon" and to prevent the coming social disaster, a profound transformation is required in our relationship to the Earth. This will include resacralizing nature so that people come to see the Earth as alive and part of themselves. A future Earth-centered society will need to be organized around an ecocentric morality that has an essential spiritual or sacred dimension and is not based on economics.

The discussions among left biocentrists about what it means to advocate the resacralization of nature are ongoing and contentious. Some left bios, including myself, have been influenced by atheism or the Marxist tradition that sees organized religion as an "opiate," while other left bios have some kind of relationship to various institutional religions. Left bios usually draw a distinction between "institutional religion" and "spirituality". Resacralizing the Earth is seen as a concern with spirituality, not with establishing some new institutional religion.

Left biocentrism is interested in what should be our relationship to the spiritualities of Aboriginal cultures, in particular animism. The basic idea that the Earth is alive, and that plants and animals have their own intrinsic spirits and values, has in the past acted as a restraint on human exploitation. However, animism, which sustained hunter/gatherer societies over thousands of years, was still ultimately human centered, perhaps a form of "deep stewardship," and this did not prevent the now documented extinctions of fauna in the Americas, Polynesia, New Zealand, and Australia.

Deep ecology, which is not human-centered, must build on but go beyond an animistic "seventh generation" consciousness to resacralize *all* species on Earth.

Millions of people around the world use religion as their ethical guide. These religions help shape how people interact with the natural world through different cultures, and the place of humankind within these cultures. Religions differ in this regard and an important part of any deeper ecological work is endeavoring to understand this, so as to ecologically engage with existing religions. There are ongoing discussions on the differences between, as well as within, the Abrahamic and the Vedic religions in regard to ecological consciousness. Within deep ecology, for example, a number of writers have been influenced by Buddhism. The concern with self-realization in deep ecology seems analogous to the Buddhist sense of the interconnected self with the universe. E. F. Schumacher, himself a Catholic, outlined in the early 1970s in his book *Small is Beautiful* what he called a "Buddhist economics," seeking to move societies away from capitalist consumerism as a false identity basis, to an identity based on the cultivation of personal inner growth. The theoretical tendency of institutional religions is a concern for left biocentrism and has come more to the foreground with the prominence of a variety of religious fundamentalisms (e.g. Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu) that seem lacking in any ecological awareness. Religious fundamentalists want to resacralize human societies, not the natural world.

In order for industrial capitalism to commodify the Earth, Earth-based spirituality had to be undermined. Left biocentrists believe that addressing this is a crucial part of any engaged green politics in the twenty-first century.

David Orton, April 29, 2002

Further Reading

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McLaughlin, Andrew. *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, USA, 1993.

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Sylvan, Richard and Bennett, David. *The Greening of Ethics: From Human Chauvinism to Deep-Green Theory*. The Whitehorse Press, Cambridge, UK and The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, USA, 1994.

Taylor, Bron, ed. *Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*. State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 1995.

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