

Mixed Thoughts on Ecosocialism

Below is my contribution to a recent discussion on ecosocialism on the internet group leftbio.

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Since coming to political awareness, I have always considered myself as part of the Left, personally defining myself as a communist or socialist. Marx and Marxism (and communism) were positives for me. I even visited Marx's grave in London to pay my respects on one of my trips home to England, after immigrating to Canada. After my ecological awareness developed in the late 1970s, and particularly after grasping the deep ecology vision of Arne Naess, I came to see that ecology was primary. My leftism had to be subordinate to this. Attempting to incorporate biocentrism or ecocentrism into my leftism, which should be one of the main projects of ecosocialism, has been a constant theme in my ecological theoretical life.

I tried to bring ecology and my leftism together, and quite a few of my essays and book reviews explore this. Since boyhood, wildlife and Nature have been important for me. I initially spoke of myself as a supporter of "socialist ecology." Later, once introduced to deep ecology and understanding its primary importance in the mid 1980s, I tried to fuse deep ecology and my left awareness. I initially called this position "socialist biocentrism." There were then no theoretical role models that I was aware of. Eventually, in September of 1988, I stumbled upon Andy MacLaughlin at a Vermont deep ecology conference for activists. I realized we were fellow travellers, trying to fuse deep ecology and a leftist perspective. I presented the concept of "socialist biocentrism", along with Helga Hoffmann-Orton, in a paper "Green Marginality in Canada." This was in June of 1989, at the Learned Societies Conference, Laval University, Quebec City.

Within the activist movement in Canada at that time, I opposed a social ecology attempt to present it as the *only* theoretical way forward for those interested in both ecology and leftism – the 1988 "Left Green Network" initiative. This initiative was spawned in the United States, with Murray Bookchin being the major philosophical influence. I was also trying to relate, for organizing purposes, and given that ecological concerns were primary, to fellow non-left environmental activists around a number of wildlife, forest, and uranium issues. These non-left activists, if theoretically aware, were contemptuous of anyone trying to link socialism and the environment. Later, as my understanding of the ecological limitations of both theoretical Marxism and the record of "actually existing" socialist or communist societies deepened, I came to realize that "socialist biocentrism" was an impossible and misleading theoretical fusion. This concept let socialist or communist societies off the hook for past ecological crimes committed in their names, and it also did not take into account the anti-ecological baggage of theoretical socialism. I did not take this position from an anti-communist perspective, but from a perspective of what I considered ecological honesty. As I have said before, anti-communism is not acceptable to me, because in practice this signals an alliance with Capital.

The 2008 “My Path” Green Web Bulletin (#78) “[The Left in Left Biocentrism](#)” summarizes my theoretical journey in trying to come to terms with deep ecology and a left perspective. This eventually resulted in an evolving awareness of, and commitment to, a theoretical tendency within deep ecology called “left biocentrism.” Bulletin #78 summarized a number of articles and book reviews and explained why I could not call myself an “ecosocialist.” It also explained why I felt that this is an inappropriate and misleading banner to raise for others to rally behind, despite my own life-long leftist credentials. (Personally, just from a left perspective, I feel more radical than most ecosocialists I have bumped up against. Apparently, the RCMP in 1971 wanted to bring a case against me for “sedition”, according to *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP*, by Lorne and Caroline Brown, p. 122.) I believe that the ecosocialist banner arrogantly pre-empted the needed discussions about what an ecologically and socially just society will look like in the future. So much is unknown. Using the term “ecosocialism” implies that ecosocialists have the answers – where are the past models? – and this is simply not true. The socialist and communist traditions will however have much to contribute on the social justice side to the shape of future human societies and, by negative example, on the environmental side. (The valid concern with democratic rights and personal freedoms, not properly dealt with in past communist societies, is something important to me, particularly as a dissenter within industrial capitalism.)

There are five other writers who come to mind as key original thinkers, who have made theoretical contributions in trying to fuse deep ecology and leftism. They are: Andrew McLaughlin, Rudolf Bahro (who never specifically mentioned deep ecology in his writings to my knowledge), Judy Bari, Andrew Dobson and Fred Bender. Bender, who contacted me after his 2003 book *The Culture of Extinction: Toward a Philosophy of Deep Ecology* came out, seems to have been unaware of left biocentrism when writing his book. In internet postings concerning ecofeminist discussions, Bender stated that he identifies with left biocentrism. All these people were clearly self-consciously of the left but also strong supporters of deep ecology. (Bahro informed me by personal letter of December 20, 1995, a couple of years before he died of cancer, and after reading various left biocentric writings that I had sent him, that he agreed “with the essential points” of the left biocentric theoretical tendency.)

I have never had personal contact with the British theorist Andrew Dobson, although his book *Green Political Thought: An Introduction*, in its various editions, brought together a deep ecology awareness and an overall leftism. (See my [review essay](#).)

Let me make a few comments about Andy McLaughlin and Judi Bari:

Andy McLaughlin’s *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology* came out in 1993. This was a very important book for giving some theoretical foundations in fusing deep ecology and a left perspective. Andy, writing as a socialist, presented the position, which became incorporated into left biocentrism, that industrial society is the main problem, and that it has variants, which are both capitalist and socialist. (p. 172) This is one of the points distinguishing left biocentrism from ecosocialists, who stress capitalism as the principal contradiction. (Left biocentrists are also anti-capitalist.) Twenty years earlier, John Livingston made the same point in the 1973 book *One Cosmic Instant*, about industrialization being the main problem, and he

pursued this in later books. But Livingston made this observation from a non-left perspective. As he said in the 1994 book *Rogue Primate*, his last major work: “Both ‘right’ and ‘left’ subscribe to and are subsumed by the greater ideology of the industrial-growth ethos.” (p. 59)

Judy Bari wrote an essay in 1995, “[Revolutionary Ecology: Biocentrism & Deep Ecology](#)”, which was very important because she had activist leadership credentials in the Earth First! movement in California, as well as a history of involvement in working class social justice struggles. Judi consciously brought together her leftism (she said she was a Marxist) with seeing the vital importance of deep ecology for a theoretical synthesis. (She sent me a draft of her article for critical comment. I expressed overall support for her path and some friendly criticisms concerning her “workerism”, utopian views on aboriginals, and her views on ecofeminism.)

Ecosocialism and Left Biocentrism: Is there a theoretical exchange or just a divide?

The basic problem for the Left is that the environmental and green movements worldwide have emerged, with a new worldview struggling to define itself, in the main, *outside* of the socialist/communist movements. Like Rudolf Bahro and Saral Sarkar, I believe the ecology movement is the greatest enemy that capitalism has. I have tried to straddle the ecocentric environmental movement and the left. Overall, I have felt rejection by leftists who were outside of deep ecology thinking. There have been what might appear to be “successes”, including for example being invited to be an editorial board member of the Marxist journal **CNS (Capitalism, Nature, Socialism)**, after the 1989 Green Web Bulletin #4 “Green Marginality in Canada” appeared, when Jim O’Connor was editor in chief. I later resigned from the editorial board. I had several articles published in CNS, including a review of [Ecology, Community and Lifestyle](#) by Arne Naess. The clash of views between O’Connor’s Marxist perspective (which was that of this journal) and mine as a leftist, but also a supporter of deep ecology, is shown in the CNS article “[Discussion: Socialist Biocentrism](#).” Another “success” was writing a column for two years for Canadian Dimension (1990-1992), the left social democratic magazine, although eventually terminated by the magazine. More recently, in 2006, CD named me as one of six environmental activists who are supposedly “changing the world.” But overall I have felt myself an outsider and have been treated as such by prominent “ecosocialists.” The left biocentric analysis has been basically ignored in ecosocialist discussions that I am aware of.

A notable exception is perhaps Saral Sarkar, a personal friend and prominent European ecosocialist, known because of his writings, like the 1999 *Eco-socialism or Eco-capitalism? A critical analysis of humanity’s fundamental choices*. Saral has chosen not to embrace deep ecology or ecocentrism, but he does take ecological questions and the question of ecological limits very seriously. A “fundi” tenor permeates his writing. He is a strong critic of the ecocapitalist road pursued by the German Greens. For Sarkar, the ecology movement, for the first time in history, “‘promises’ a lower standard of living if it is successful.” (p. 227) (He does not discuss left biocentrism in this book, although he and I had been in theoretical exchange for quite a number of years before his *Eco-socialism* book appeared.) His concern for ecological questions, plus his ideas of small scale non-industrial socialism, his environmental critique of the environmental record of communist societies – in particular that of the late Soviet Union – plus

seeing the importance of population reduction, etc. has enabled Sarkar to be published in Dandelion Times, an internet site for the voices of left biocentrism. It is important to point out however, that Sarkar insists on raising the ecosocialist banner as the only path forward. However, unlike Kovel, Sarkar presents the view that an ecosocialist ecological economy is a non-industrial society. Sarkar puts forward in his book a modern socialism with ecological sensitivity, but basically remains within a human-centered paradigm.

The present editor of *CNS*, Joel Kovel, is perhaps the most prominent ecosocialist in the U.S. and North America. I met him a couple of times, once at a luncheon with Doug Tompkins, where I presented my basic critique of his book, and again at the October 2008 conference in San Francisco, "Is Capitalism Soon Over?", hosted by the International Forum on Globalization. His book, *The Enemy of Nature: The End Of Capitalism Or The End Of The World?*, which came out in 2002, outlines his basic ecosocialist ideas. An updated and expanded second edition was published in 2007. See my [critique](#) of the first edition. As opposed to Sarkar, Kovel, who fuses Marxism and social ecology in his thinking, wants to keep industrial society. Kovel's negative and quite slanderous view of deep ecology has softened in his second edition, from his first edition position that "Deep Ecology comes home as the strategy of advanced capitalist elites, for whom nature is what looks good on calendars." (p. 172) Kovel argues against what he calls "nature mysticism" in deep ecology, which he links to fascism and is defined as considering human beings as having "the status of just another species in the 'web of life.'" (pp. 183-184) Green politics is classified as "petty bourgeois." There is a strong sense of "all is foretold" in Marx and Marxism, a recurring theme among ecosocialists who are Marxists. This often results in what comes across as vanguard arrogance. Left biocentrism was not mentioned in the first edition, although the second edition gives left biocentrism and myself a positive footnote. (p. 302) Unfortunately, this is undercut by the inaccurate comment, "Like many deep greens, however, Orton hates socialism and considers it doomed to remain in its twentieth-century form." Joel Kovel does have a very good anti-Zionist position.

The ecocentric left is not anti-Marxist, but it accepts the limitations of Marx and Marxism from an ecological perspective. As Robin Eckersley points out her 1992 book *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*, Marx had an "exclusive preoccupation with human betterment" and "showed no interest in natural history, and he did not address the cause of nonhuman suffering." (p.84) Recent Marxist scholarship by John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett has however argued that Marx does have serious ecological credentials.

I recently resigned from an internet ecosocialist list. Joel Kovel from the States and Ian Angus from Canada are prominent voices on this list. The list seems to date back to 2007 and currently has 257 members. Through Helga, I had been posting there my various writings. The list eventually developed a kind of basic platform, which all were asked to sign onto, called the Belém Declaration, named after a city in Brazil where an organizing meeting of ecosocialists was held. I decided that I could not sign and my reasons are given below. These reasons were posted to the ecosocialist list and elsewhere. They serve to highlight differences, which, as a left biocentrist, I have with the common assumptions of a group of ecosocialists. Among these ecosocialists the main claim to an ecological interest seems to be climate change. In many ways such ecosocialists have used climate change to become prominent. (I later resigned from the ecosocialist list because of remarks on the list by Derek Wall, a British ecosocialist in the Green

Party, which I felt were unprincipled, and which were not opposed by other list members.)

Below are my comments regarding the [Belém Ecosocialist Declaration](#), from December 21, 2008

Greetings ecosocialists and deep green fellow travelers:

I would like to sign on to the Belém Ecosocialist Declaration, whose spirit I am very sympathetic to, but unfortunately I cannot. There is much I agree with, as for example the critique of the market assumptions of the climate change debate (unfortunately embraced by the Green Party in Canada and Elizabeth May, the current leader). Several people who I respect, because of their work for the natural world and for social justice, including some left biocentrists, have signed on to the Declaration.

*I describe myself as someone on the socialist/communist side of the political spectrum. But I am also someone who has embraced the philosophy of deep ecology, first outlined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. This is the understanding that humans have to come into a fundamentally new ecocentric relationship with the natural world, which rejects a supposed human domination over nature. Nonhuman life and the Earth itself are to be valued independently of their usefulness for human purposes. Also, in order to thrive, human and nonhuman life need “a substantial decrease of the human population”, as the eight-point Deep Ecology Platform outlines. This does not mean that I and other deep greens “hate socialism” as one of the signers of the declaration has alleged (Joel Kovel, **The Enemy of Nature**, second edition, p. 302). It does mean, however, that a socialist/communist perspective fundamentally influenced by deep ecology does not share some of the assumptions of this Ecosocialist Declaration.*

What are some of these assumptions?

- I think the use of the term “ecosocialism” excludes options and implies that post-industrial societal models of sustainability (based on the socialist/communist tradition) already exist and can be adopted and modified. This is foolish and unfortunate Left arrogance, given the historical record. The environmental legacies of “actually existing” socialist and communist societies are quite negative. (The possible exception here would be Cuba, which has shown leadership, by example, in small plot intensive urban gardens and in developing alternatives to fossil fuel-based rural agriculture, and in the protection of the island's natural biodiversity.)

*It seems to me that “socialism” or “ecosocialism”, as a description of a future deep ecology-inspired and socially just post-capitalist society, is not adequate or inspirational. The type of future ecocentric and socially just social formations is up for discussion. There are no worked out social models that can be simply adopted. Socialism is in many ways an expression of the industrial proletariat, and while its legacy of social justice remains valid, and indeed needed for a future ecocentric society, it is not correct to say that “ecosocialism” will describe the future post-industrial ecocentric society. The features of such a society are a work in progress for all of us to engage with. I am sympathetic to the view expressed by Saral Sarkar in his book **Eco-socialism or Eco-capitalism?**, that “There is no contradiction between socialism and a truly ecological economy if the former can be conceived of as a non-industrial society...” (p. 5)*

- Stan Rowe (1918-2004), a Canadian eco-philosopher, was also a socialist. But he noted in his writings that we are first Earthlings, part of mother Earth, and only in second place human beings. For Stan, both capitalism and socialism as social systems express the basic problem of species selfishness. As he pointed out in his first book of essays **Home Place**, "Neither philosophical liberalism championing liberty nor philosophical socialism championing equality will save us from ourselves. Human history will end in ecology, or nothing." (p. 7) The Belém Declaration is unfortunately people-centered, not Earth-centered. Where is the advocacy for wilderness preservation and other species? Nonhuman species appear to be an afterthought. Social justice for humans is of course necessary, but it must be subordinate to Earth justice for all species. As Rowe has said, although socialism and capitalism share a common "rapacious" anthropocentric view towards Earth exploitation, "socialism has the virtue of extending the circle of care beyond the selfish individual, at least turning our vision outward in the right direction." (p. 193) But social justice for humans cannot be at the expense of the ecology. "Community" has to include not just humans but other animals, plants and the Earth itself.

- There is no mention of population reduction in the Declaration. This should be a priority for an ecocentric socially just society. It is not only wrong from a human-welfare perspective - there are far too many of us - but it shows that the habitat needs of other life forms are not considered important.

- The Declaration assumes that it is capitalism, not industrialism, which is the main problem. Left biocentrists see industrial society's social and technological formation as the main problem, and it can have a capitalist or a socialist face.

- The Declaration assumes "full employment for all" in the new ecosocialist society. This statement conveys that the transition will be painless, and implies that production and consumption will continue. Nothing could be further from the truth. To live sustainably will mean living with much less, along with serious redistribution of wealth to those who are economically marginalized. As has been said, the ecology movement is the first social movement in history to promise a lower material standard of living.

- I feel that generally the Declaration underplays the primary contribution of the environmental and green movements, which have not, in the main, been driven by a socialist consciousness. Socialists have mainly been in the wings, not in the activist vanguard.

- The Declaration says nothing about the need for a new Earth-centered ethics, as part of a green politics, which ends the spiritual separation of most people from the natural world.

- I think that an "Anti-Capitalist Belém Declaration" would be a more appropriate and encompassing name. The endless growth and consumerism of capitalism has no respect for the ecological limits of the Earth or concern for fundamental social justice for all citizens. This could be a banner to rally a wide variety of opposition forces, and it could allow the needed discussion about the nature of a future Earth-friendly and socially just world society. This discussion is pre-empted by using the term "ecosocialist".

The above should not convey that I am hostile to the Belém Ecosocialist Declaration, because I am not. I regard this Declaration as a positive development and wish to maintain a dialogue with those who sign the Declaration. There is not just one path forward for the Ecocentric Left.

As Naess has said, "the front is long." Perhaps the Declaration will be modified in a more Earth-centered direction at the forthcoming January 2009 meeting in Brazil, a vast country with a rich diversity of plant and animal life, as well as peoples from many ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Conclusion

I have come to the position, based on my own experiences, that left bios and ecosocialists (as presently organized) are not going to be able to work together because of the different theoretical assumptions held.

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