

# Earth Democracy and Ecosocialism: What's in a Name?

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After hearing Vandana Shiva's October 2009 Hagey Lecture, I would suggest that her conception of "Earth Democracy" sounds and looks a lot like ecosocialism, though it may not be called ecosocialism by those who are living it. But what is in a name?

As someone who came to ecosocialism via the ecofeminism of Vandana Shiva, it is easy for me to see the ecosocialist shape of Shiva's "Earth Democracy." The ten principles of Earth Democracy are summarized as follows by Shiva.<sup>1</sup>

**1. All species, peoples, and cultures have intrinsic worth.**

All living beings, including humans, are subjects (not owned commodities) that have intrinsic worth. No humans have the right to own them.

**2. The earth community is a democracy of all life.**

We are all part of the interconnected web of life. We have a duty to protect ecological processes and the rights of all species and all people. No humans have the right to encroach on the ecological space of other species.

**3. Diversity in nature and culture must be defended.**

We have a duty to defend these two kinds of diversity. They are the basis of sustainability and peace.

**4. All beings have a natural right to sustenance.**

Resources vital to the natural right to sustenance (which is the natural right to life itself) must stay in the commons. These are natural and not state or corporate-given rights and so states and corporations cannot deny or erode these natural rights or enclose the commons.

**5. Earth Democracy is based on living commons and economic democracy.**

Earth democracy is based on economic democracy that protects ecosystems and provides basic needs for all. The earth economy is living in that it is based on diverse, sustainable, pluralistic systems that protect nature and people, are chosen by people, and work for the common good.

**6. Living economies are built on local economies.**

Conservation of the earth's resources and creation of sustainable and satisfying livelihoods are most caringly, creatively, efficiently, and equitably achieved at the local level. Localization of economies is a social and ecological imperative. In Earth Democracy, the global economy does not destroy and crush local economies, nor does it create disposable people. Living economies are diverse and decentralized economies.

**7. Earth Democracy is a living democracy.**

Earth democracy is based on local democracy where communities are organized on

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<sup>1</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), pp. 9-11.

principles of inclusion, diversity, and ecological and social responsibility. Local communities have the highest authority on decisions related to the environment and natural resources and the sustenance and livelihoods of people.

#### **8. Earth Democracy is based on living cultures.**

Living cultures promote peace. They create free spaces for the practice of different religions, faiths, and identities. They allow cultural diversity to thrive from the ground of our common humanity and our common rights as members of an earth community.

#### **9. Living cultures are life nourishing.**

Living cultures are based on the dignity of and respect for all life, human and nonhuman, people of all genders and cultures, present and future generations. Living cultures are, therefore, ecological cultures which do not promote life-destroying lifestyles or consumption and production patterns, or the overuse and exploitation of resources. Living cultures are diverse and based on reverence for life. Living cultures recognize the multiplicity of identities based in an identity of place and local community—and a planetary consciousness that connects the individual to the earth and all life.

#### **10. Earth Democracy globalizes peace, care, and compassion.**

Earth Democracy unites rather than divides.

In her lecture, reproduced in this issue, Shiva contrasts the fossil-fuel dependent dead economy of capitalism with the hand- and solar-centered living economy of Earth Democracy. In doing so she expresses ecosocialists' commitments to overcome exploitation and re-invent the commons. Not only are ecosocialism and Earth Democracy consistent, they are, to me, one and the same struggle.

Shiva's earlier work is foundational to 21<sup>st</sup> century *ecofeminist* ecosocialism. Her 1988 analysis of Chipko women's struggles against multinational logging companies showed that in fighting enclosures, village women challenged local men who had accepted subcontracts to cut the communities' trees. Chipko women—who gave the world “tree-hugging”—prevented capitalist enclosures by physically blocking forest expropriators, some of whom were their own husbands. Against many men's objections, but with the support of other men, the women asserted their rights to control their own labor, its products, and the means of production—the commons.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to constituting ecofeminist ecosocialism in action, the tree-huggers' case gave new empirical and theoretical groundings on which other ecofeminists have built. For example, Shiva's analysis of Chipko led Terisa Turner to develop the concept of the capitalist “male deal.”<sup>3</sup> This “deal” recognizes the gendered character of capitalist exploitation by specifying the part of

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<sup>2</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (London: Zed, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Turner was also informed by Carol Dauda's 1992 thesis on the precapitalist male deal in West Africa, through which all men party to the deal were guaranteed (often very unequal) access to fertile women. Carol L. Dauda, “Yan Tatsine and the Male Deal: Islam, Gender and Class Struggle in Northern Nigeria,” unpublished MA thesis, Political Studies Department, University of Guelph, Ontario, 1992. See also Terisa E. Turner, “Rastafari and the New Society: Caribbean and East African Feminist Roots of a Popular Movement to Reclaim the Earthly Commons,” in Terisa E. Turner (ed.), *Arise Ye Mighty People! Gender, Class, and Race in Popular Struggles* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), pp. 9-56.

exploited men in channelling women's unpaid labor and the commons into profit-making circuits of capital. The "male deal" has been key to my own ecosocialist analysis which, in turn, is rooted in my understanding of Vandana Shiva's earth politics. Shiva's work has also enriched the analyses of many of the ecofeminists and ecosocialists who have published in these pages.

The analytical gift of Shiva's ecofeminism is to provide a window onto the creative struggles of the most exploited *against* their exploitation and *for* the construction of a new society. This is a "new society" founded not only on workers' control over the means of production, but more broadly on the recovery of humanity's full expression in the idea of the "species-being," which affirms that "I am because you are." Raising the possibility and necessity of the recuperation of the species-being, Shiva wrote in 2009:

When the self is perceived as being at war with nature and society, rather than part of nature and society, alienation and violence become "natural" to being. Peace and recovery of our ecological selves requires that we re-embed ourselves in the web of life and the web of social relationships.<sup>4</sup>

The Earth Democracy movement treads a path through organic gardens, farmers' markets, seed banks, and community organizations. It passes in protest by Monsanto's headquarters, patent offices, Coca Cola plants, and World Trade Organization meetings. It haunts the halls of the United Nations and courts around the world, where it carries messages of natural rights against corporate wrongs. In so doing, the Earth Democracy movement demonstrates that the new society, which will return "everything to everyone," is being realized through Gandhian initiatives that "can begin with constructive action and turn it into our best resistance."<sup>5</sup>

The fight against capitalist globalization has largely been the fight against those who impose monocrops and monothoughts (fear, terror, threats of violence, silence, party lines). What ecosocialists have been struggling "for" is everything, for everyone, not only for ourselves; all of life and the whole planet; we want it all back; we see it all as "ours," that is, "everyone's." The Earth Democracy movement shows us one way to get it: by instituting and upholding democratically established laws against the subversion imposed by corporations and governments. And, through the duty of civil disobedience, overturning "the superstition that people should obey unjust laws."<sup>6</sup>

A critical step in the construction of this new world is to understand and embrace the already existing commoning alternatives. Pre- as well as post-capitalist commoning is most firmly established in the so-called Third World, amongst people who are not fossil fuel addicts, and where cooperation and collectivity remain most intact despite ongoing capitalist enclosures.

To overcome alienation and recover a humane species-being requires us to become commoners once again. One imperative of commoning is that we learn the skills that we will need in order to live once the world has "turned upside-down." These include subsistence self-sufficiency, cooperation, collectivity, sharing, and non-oil-based production, transport, communication, heating, health care, and more.

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<sup>4</sup> Vandana Shiva, "The Practice of Earth Democracy: Looking Ahead—Experiences from 30 Years of Participatory Research and Community Action," *Development Dialogue*, No. 52, August 2009, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

To be ecofeminist is, in part, to recognize and learn from peoples engaged in already existing commoning activities and social relations that point the way to the future for us all. Shiva names this future “Earth Democracy.” Her revolutionary ecofeminism both exposes the problems of capital and the ways that commoners have long struggled to solve these problems, not through technical fixes but through the outright replacement of the system with a new one, grounded in the commons.