

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Preconditions for an Ecological Aesthetic

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If what we called imperialism has developed into an extensive investment in militarism plus efforts of global resource domination, the accurate description would be to label the current status of U.S. interests as *Empyrean*, since we are now in the stage of late capitalism called *Empire*.

The accumulation of events, changes and expansion of conditions of our social political cultural system—i.e., the capitalist system—should suggest, and require changes in the oppositional approach to that system.

Marxists and leftists who found that “actually existing socialism” had failed to live up to expectations have been rethinking and reevaluating what they mean by capitalism and socialism.

Those on the Left who still remain Marxists, old line socialists, and communists despite changes in conditions, make excuses for socialist problems and expect the system to collapse or implode on its own contradictions, or increase its contradictions and crisis till it overextends itself and fails. This view holds that we are in the *late* stage capitalism or the *last* stage of capitalism. But we have, unfortunately, been in the late and last stage of capitalism for a very long time. Jim O’Connor pointed out in *Natural Causes* that socialist instruments would be used to save capitalism, and so trillions of dollars have recently consolidated the banks, hedge funds, investment gangsters and now protect the essential Ponzi schemers. Brecht commented moons ago: “What is the robbing of a bank compared to founding one.”

There are others who would reform the system and improve its donations to the exploited. Then there are those who, though they reject socialism and either mouth anarchist phrases or become Buddhists and drop out of social political economic constructs, nevertheless still engage in individual activities that become models for post-capitalist society. And a good number of the above—despite historical knowledge, facts, data, and previous experience—rely upon hope and prayer.

Socialism and its proposals need to be revised despite its systemic critique of capitalism. Social democratic reforms of capitalism are, in my estimation, stopgap band-aids suggesting changes of one or two structural elements that are eventually overrun by counter revolutionary movements. What was done in the sixties, for example, was rolled back by Thatcher, Reagan, Paul Volker and Deng Xiaoping. These conservatives prepared the groundwork for the Clinton centrist neoliberals which inevitably led to the implementation of the reactionary Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld, who used militarism as a central feature of the *Empire*.

The nostalgia for the sixties, when utopian revolutionary chatter was rabid, doesn’t help in addressing the current conditions of the empire. Therefore we need to rethink oppositional and alternative proposals and activities that previously only related to mere imperialism. The search and seizure of natural resources includes, as we come to realize, grave ecological damage. Exploitation now operates on many levels in numerous areas, mostly out of reach of local, regional, and national

civic action. The instruments of capitalism have been outsourced (internationalized), yet we still have people mouthing “talking truth to power.”

Given the present reorganization of the state and its foreign policy, with its concurrence and coordination of nationalism, patriotism, and militarism, the protest art forms we used in the sixties, and that are still in use in demonstrations, murals, posters, theatre and documentary film, in my estimation, are in the main unable to address the *structural problems* of the Empire. With shrunken civil liberties, 750 to 1,000 military bases around the world, two parties that agree on the economy, budgeting the military and foreign exploits—CIA covert action, mercenaries abroad and at home—current liberal left responses to Empyrean conditions are little more than nostalgic synecdoches (emphasis on the dochies—the Oky-dochies).

Protest in the arts is complaining without explaining: “It’s bad but, activism can turn the whole into good,” is about as far as protest art can take us. Complaining about those in power is repeatedly done every year. With another war every five years, the same signs, “Peace now” and “Bring the troops home” are displayed—all repetitive, harmless, and a virtual simulacrum of previous efforts.

What Can Refurbish a Socialist Renewal

A substantial international perspective based on ecology, which is in itself intrinsically international, is needed. It is not the environmental bumper sticker slogan “Think globally act locally.” Rather, reverse the slogan and an ecological view appears: “Think locally act globally” is closer to the shift needed in our focus. Ecological factors are not local but regional, not regional but ecozones and biomes. The butterfly in Beijing flutters from coal smoke, and a storm of acid rain comes down in California. Clear-cutting despoils rivers, and rivers pollute oceans. Include industrial and agricultural toxic chemical run-off to the predatory international factory fishing, and fisheries become depleted. Asians suffer carbon emissions while buying carbon credits in Africa. Where does the carbon and, more importantly, the methane go? The bourgeois delusion that one can make a difference by not driving one’s car is a diversionary tactic, a useless palliative. Industrial and agribusiness pollution are the greatest polluters, while mass transportation would reduce traffic jams and limit the individual car. An international and global ecological perspective would broaden socialist nationalist focus and the usual insistence on increased consumption of commodities for the working class. The so-called “American dream” is based upon other people’s nightmares.

Rather than protest, begin resistance. Rather than resistance, initiate replacement. The structural replacement of consequence is an ecological socialist one. The dual discipline of ecology and socialism interrogate and improve each other. This kind of dual discipline can be found in the ecological disciplines as well. Similarly, biogeography is a combination of biology and geography much like agroecology, agriculture, and ecology are united and are therefore interdisciplinary as well as interrogatory activities.

What deepens an ecological socialist view of society and ecology? What is the means by which nature becomes part of people’s lives and ecological factors turn humans into part of nature rather than urban commodities? An ecological point of view rather than a simple biological one declares that an exchange of nutrients is the operative procedure between species. The interaction between species is a transfer of nutrients and energy, while the forces of nature on human nature is

the operative definition of an ecological experience. All mix and interact with each other as in evolutionary biology. Nature is affected by humans, and humans either try to exploit nature and humans, or work alongside with, for, and inside nature as a partner.

One has to be careful not to become a socio-biologist or eco-centrist who looks to science and nature as the master text for human society. Ecologists have rejected reading social structures into nature, so it would also behoove us not to automatically read nature into human society. However, it is impossible to read nature objectively with educated bourgeois tools. A good example of how to proceed is organic farming, which requires a combination of scientific knowledge and traditional folk wisdom with direct experience to manage ecological food production. Again, here is science being interrogated by a traditional folk practice, intercropping. So, too, biogeographical descriptions require understanding of nature's flux, stochastic pointed equilibrium plus plate tectonics, weather patterns, the Milankovich cycles of the Earth's orbit, and the interaction of all these factors. Global factors create multiple influences that in turn cause confusion and surprising results.

The melting of the glaciers is a more concrete image of climate change than "global warming." Global warming is also a chemical process resulting from multiple factors such as CO₂, nitrogen and the disappearance of carbon sinks, methane from rice and cow belching, toxic agribusiness chemicals and industrial pollution, all affecting different parts of the biosphere. Glacial melt is a clear sign not merely a signifier of climate change. It will raise the ocean levels, flooding lowlands, increase the intensity of storms, change the patterns of the Gulf Stream and upwelling, all affecting human habitat. (The answer is? Move away from the shore and desalinate the floodwaters.)

Any of the environmental solutions we can come up with are mere mitigations but also opportunities for an ecological socialist approach that includes local, regional, national, and international compliance, plus an effective institutionalization of two, three, or more solutions. (One, two, three Vietnams—One, two, three subversive ecological solutions. Here is the opportunity for a postmodern IWW—now the International Ecosocialists of the World, IEW.)

If one country doesn't pollute and the others do, nothing improves. Fisheries are a good example of the "international" factors in environmental matters. Most predation comes from factory fishing ships from the U.S., Japan, Scandinavian countries, and anyone else who can float a ship twelve miles out, drop a net ten miles wide, and sweep up every one thing in that area. Poorer fisherman drop bombs into the water to blow up the fish; others use drag nets and snatch fish. Protection of fisheries is an international problem. No single nation can manage it, since all nations have to agree to limitations and enforcement controls.

Ecological Interrogation of Socialism

Interrogation of concepts of ecology are important—which unfortunately has been left in the hands and minds of pacifists or anti-communists and people who don't want to get their hands dirty messing around with political economics. At the same time, socialists often consider environmentalism after the fact, tacked on to political agendas, wherein industrial production of goods for overconsumption is an obligatory promise of U.S. candidates. Obese America is patriotic. Who will tell the obese poor to stop killing themselves... and polluting the ozone with methane?

Ecological socialism has the most interesting combination to become an *effective* tool and instrument to challenge capitalist industrialization, since ecological matters are not compatible with capitalist exploitation of nature's resources and humans.

What will assist ecological socialism in concretizing and becoming effective, and turn it into a deepened ecology similar to Arne Næss's proposals? Although deep ecology offers a good start, its pacifist version limits efforts to individualized heroics and consciousness-raising constructions. It needs the pepper and acidity (acridity?) of Murray Bookchin plus a view of revolutionary possibilities derived from the works of Antonio Negri in *The Savage Anomaly*, *Empire*, and *Multitude*. This applied to deep ecology would clarify an ecosocialist agenda.

Negri's objective is to find a way around the old communist revolutionary parties and through the mix and mess of anarchism, yet construct a force that will disrupt, maneuver, and take charge. Not immediately, but by asking the questions and opening the debate as to how to change the system. And this requires admitting the system has not changed via old-line socialist, communist, Marxist views. Neither for that matter has the environmental, feminist, nor identity political "revolutions" had much effect on halting continued ecological devastation. My argument is that an ecological aesthetic as part of an ecosocialist view will address unattended areas including culture and prove intractable in a dispute with capitalist consumerism and neoliberalism that are based on three ideological components of the Empire: militarism, patriotism and nationalism.

Ecological Aesthetics

Aesthetics makes the heart grow FANATICALLY fonder for a way of life with flora and fauna and humans as one among the species.

The exploitation of nature and humans is the worst aspect of capitalist systems and even some socialist ones. To destroy human habitat for short run gains is to harm humans while destroying other species. James O'Connor's "Second Contradiction of Capitalism" focuses on the devastation of resources that are essential for capitalist expansion and production. It is a political economic observation. One could argue the collapse of actually existing socialism was based in part—in part, I repeat—on its failure to address cultural matters. Bourgeois culture undermined anything and almost everything called socialist. For ecosocialism to take root and grow like mycorrhiza, it must have an ecological aesthetic component.

How can we bridge the gap between nature and humans? The Brecht Method—that is, a dialectical approach—is the most obvious basis of an aesthetic, to begin with. It would serve the cultural component within ecosocialism.

An aesthetic that declares itself on the side of an ecological understanding of nature must also displace the already displaced humans; they are no longer in the Biblical or humanist center. The planet Earth was moved from the center in the 17th century. Why not displace the human from the center of the planet in the 21st century?

Living with and in nature requires that we understand nature, rather than conquering it, since not living with nature means destroying human habitat. Yet living with nature requires recognizing that the forces of nature are often beyond human control. Humans can destroy habitat yet may not

be able to replace or use technological tools to reproduce and control it. The hubris of control, domination, and exploitation in industrial human affairs doesn't operate effectively with nature.

Lowering the level of human ability to predict and thereby control nature occurs in the study of physics—quantum physics messes up the certainty in the workings of light and matter. Einstein didn't like God playing dice, as quantum physics argues that light is both waves and particles. And Heisenberg didn't like Bohr's rejection of certainty. String theory adds eleven dimensions—not just two or three, but eleven. Nature from a scientific view, down to the atomic and sub-atomic level, requires a giving up of the simplistic Newtonian and the more complex Einsteinian notions to juggle questionable quantum ideas. Nature understood at the atomic level does not look the same as it does at the level of organic gardening and farming.

Ecological science teaches us to look at three levels: one with the naked eye, the second with a microscope, and the third, delving into the abstract theoretical sub-atomic level. Those who fix nature as one unit, just as those who consider science an opaque authoritative closed system, are off the mark. As soon as we engage in scientific research (not just indirect mediated observation), we find a number of disputes both real and egotistical, careerist and substantive, in numerous areas. With a little study one can find an alternative theory to refute the existing one within the accepted paradigm. As Neils Bohr said to Heisenberg: "Sorry, there is no certainty." Heisenberg burst out crying.

Given this uncertainty and current inability to understand the workings of nature—at the deepest level and in many areas in the other two levels—wouldn't the researcher need to juggle, dance, hop from foot to foot mentally, and even reverse directions and back up? Is the Lenin mambo—"two steps forward one step back"—applicable? Don't we have to be able to think in multiple directions and keep no less than two theories in the mind at the same time? Slavoj Zizek advises two options, neither acceptable—reject both, think that!

Our understanding of how nature works, the amazing ingenuity of adaptation, evolution, and adjustment, the strategies for survival and expansion, and the intricacy of it all transforms our notion of aesthetics. Intrigued by the intricacy, startled by the strategy, amazed by the complexity for survival and the ability of species to adapt, maneuver, and adjust will bring on greater interest in how things work and thereby connect humans with the workings of natural science.

This view is almost a utilitarian one wherein nature is useful to humans, as with organic farming, river rehabilitation, and wetland protection. The other area less subjective is called "pure science" as in pure nature, as nature is to be appreciated for itself, in itself. But pure science is like weeds that haven't found their way into the human diet; they are, however, connected to the less visible functions of nature. What is pure science? Isn't it like pure art, in itself supported by elites and wealthy funding?

Much pure science is also funded by the U.S. Department of Defense military budget. From the capitalist point of view, the undirected research of pure science has to provide investment potentials and profits, thereby distorting science, life, meaning, and this paper. However, with a socialist view we would expect less applied, immediate gains dominating all efforts, and instead accept a longer view of the knowledge gained for all, with no commercial application yet in mind. We know insights that were proposed years ago and rested quietly, like spores in the soil, sprout

years later. Artists understand this when working on a problem that appears to be intractable—give it up let it “cook,” and eventually it might in a daydream, accident, or nightmare, become solvable. The creative aspect of science is no less elaborate than in the arts.

What I think is beautiful is my (acquired) aesthetic; what we (socially) consider beautiful may not be an ecologically healthy advance. A beautiful car to some is a gas-guzzler and a stupid machine that kills people and is an object for stealing. An image of a monoculture tracted farm to the vanishing point is a toxic disaster. Can you discern all that by looking at the image?

An ecological aesthetic based upon scientific knowledge and study finds in nature nutrient exchanges as well as dispersal mechanisms that are intriguing. From intriguing to imagination, from astounding to creative, from complex to engaged: By combining these elements we obtain an aesthetic matrix inclusive of nature. The foundation of beauty is defined here by understanding the functions and the process of nature, engaging with it as research or practice, while realizing that nature is also slightly beyond understanding. Scientists call a useful formula elegant, artists say the experience was beautiful, scientists and artists fall in love with their work and the objects they study. Although love can cause problems, it most often leads to care, concern, and protection for mutual continuance.

For both art and science, first curiosity, interest, and superficial exploration. Second, engaged study, learning, then more curiosity, deeper research, and actual science—measuring and weighing, comparing and researching documentation, investigating the literature to explain what one has found or not found, and then writing about the find or what was not found. A negative hypothesis is as helpful as a positive one. For example, adding to the proof that notions of companion planting contains false folk fantasies (apocryphal beliefs) is helpful in avoiding wasted energy and resources. Tomatoes and basil planted together taste good on a plate but in the soil have no beneficial effect on each other. Organic farmers have to be scientists, willing to search the literature to see if what they are doing is effective. What works may be an accident, and what doesn't work may also be an accident.

When we cross over into an ecological study, with *fingers in the soil* and mind in the books, we become producers not consumers. Just as we have to make a film to understand filmmaking, play a piano to listen to music more accurately, and write in order to read analytically, we also have to produce in order to consume critically. However, this transformation requires another step.

By becoming producers in our own lives, in one way or another—producers of food, clothing, materials, and non-materials—it teaches us an ecological critique of existing social conditions while exposing the consumption of distorted needs and false wants induced by advertising and bourgeois notions of pleasure. Producers of ecological products challenge capitalist commodities while exposing the reactionary profit motive. Simple complaining we know is easy; rather an effective replacement with existing examples of ecosocialist alternatives causes disruption.

It's a bit of joke but shade-grown, fair-trade, cooperatively owned, organic and moderately priced by gender and politically engaged socialist ecologists, who are aesthetically motivated is an oppositional stance that tends to undermine overconsumption and bourgeois aesthetics.

Nevertheless, whatever we construct to equalize our relations with nature, nature's blowback, kickback, and changes will affect consumption and existence patterns. If human habitat is depleted, then bacteria, cockroaches, rats and arachnids will survive and the whole notion of human society will reshape. With a few bacteria and some heat, another habitat will arise with or without hominids. Nature doesn't need humans, since it was here 4 billion-plus years before humans came along, and will be here after human habitat is destroyed by industrial military production and wasteful overconsumption. The planet and the mini-fauna will survive.

Species extinction occurs daily, yet if evolution is the model and Darwin's worms are still around, other species will evolve. The apocalyptic vision is used to demand attention, but it is flawed. The prokaryote (single cell) turned into a eukaryote (nucleated cell), a billion years ago without the various Bibles or science attending and will continue even when the flora and fauna useful to human species dies off. Ecosystems collapse and reconstitute. The question is, can humans and can societies?

An ecological aesthetic would then have to assess scientific understanding with social economic and political economic cultural inputs and come up with an artistic expression and art form that explains nature to its portrayers (and its betrayers) and keeps people engaged in the workings of nature while understanding the place for the human species inside nature as one of many. The art forms that are derived from an ecological aesthetic are not yet recognized; however the path I suggest is through a Brecht Method, integrating ecological socialist theory along with a selection of elements from pre-bourgeois aesthetics. To replace bourgeois aesthetics we must find older forms and develop new ones that are able to contain structural analysis. On one level, art that reveals its forms—that is, its workings—also teaches us how to re-think.