

HOUSE ORGAN

The EIN

The suburb of Montreuil begins at the Eastern gate of Paris and is best known as the site of the studio where Georges Méliès developed the art of cinema out of the raw material of his training as an illusionist and magician. But those who assembled in the Mairie (prefecture) of Montreuil on October 7, 2007 to inaugurate the Ecosocialist International Network might be forgiven for believing that what they were about to set into motion might someday be recognized to have far exceeded this accomplishment. Given the scale of what the sixty or so activists from thirteen countries confronted, however, one could also be forgiven for wishing that there would be a magician in the Mairie of Montreuil on that sunny October day.

Ecosocialism is predicated on an insight, that the capitalist system is both unsustainable and incorrigible; and also a hope, that humanity has the capacity, once this is realized, to build a viable alternative society. If ecosocialists are wrong in the insight, then capitalism has the power to recuperate its ecocidal tendencies, in which case, the establishment politicians and intellectuals will be congratulated for muddling through, and radicals like ecosocialists can fold up their tents and fade away. But of course ecosocialists do not think of themselves as wrong in their diagnosis of capital's cancerous nature. If they did, they wouldn't be ecosocialists.

Whether the founding of the EIN will ever in fact be celebrated depends entirely upon whether the hope is realized as well as the insight. In other words, humanity has to survive the cancer with the help of the remedy proposed by ecosocialism. Daunting is too weak a word to describe this prospect. Unthinkable is too weak a word to describe not going forward with it.

The territory beyond the given is by definition unknown. It cannot be blueprinted but only imagined; and the most one can do in the present is to set forth certain principles drawn from historical experience and philosophical inference. In the making of the EIN, the first principle is inclusivity. No ideology or system of beliefs should be excluded from ecosocialism so long as it is predicated on the unsustainability of capital, dedicates itself to going beyond capital, and adopts what could be broadly termed an "ecocentric" ethic—that is, a program in which mending the damage to our natural world is paramount.

The Ecosocialist International Network is therefore about defining and building ecosocialism, as well as beginning the implementation of ecosocialism to save the planet from ecocatastrophe. The two sides of this cannot be separated. While no one who attended the opening session in Montreuil wanted the EIN to be an academic institution or a debating society, no one could evade, either, the fact that there were wide-ranging differences present in the room, and that what we needed first of all was a way of providing a kind of workshop, or forum, for making these differences fruitful. In short, the building of ecosocialism entails building a theory of ecosocialism. This can be seen as a matter of dialectic.

The original meaning of the term, dialectic, was that of a gathering of different

voices to build knowledge through contestation. This implies that none of us are able to grasp alone more than a small portion of truth; that truth is therefore to be achieved through collective intellectual labor; and that differences between truth-seekers are not to be suppressed but honored as potentially fecund sites of interaction. In the dialectical view, then, truth is never finished and is always a process. It is the product of interaction between the world and the human self, and an agent in the unfolding of the world. Dialectic is not a mysterious hand, a theoretic demiurge outside of us, but the real coming together of communicative individuals to make meaning out of their collective work. And just as work within external nature, say, the making of a path in the woods, or a garden, entails a complex process of moving against and with various features of the landscape, so does the dialectical building of a human group like the EIN entail the encountering and overcoming of resistances within, and the making of bonds between, the human agents of that group. From another angle, any *organization*, as the word dictates, is also an organism and a new ecosystem, which flourishes to the degree it is faithful to dialectic. Such are the hopes for the embryonic Ecosocialist International Network.

Practically speaking, this means providing a kind of political space so that the principles of dialectic can be maintained within the building of ecosocialism. This will involve some difficult but necessary maneuvering. The same inertia that haunts all left practice also haunts ecosocialism: the past that weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living, as Marx famously put it, and forces us to repeat rather than transcend history. We find this sedimented along three axes in the making of the EIN: North-South; male-female; and according to the varieties of thought corresponding to these locations.

To build a radical organization in this world is to accept the constraints of poverty, and hence, limits on what can be done materially. For the EIN this meant that we had little choice as where to hold the opening meeting: it had to be in the North, and Northern Europe in particular, because only there does the mixture of infrastructure and concentration of activists reach a critical mass. And so it was France, for the planning session, and England, for the activists—20 of the 60, representing five different tendencies. There were other attendees from Canada, the United States, and Denmark, adding their Northern weight to the affair. Meanwhile, one of the global South's most consequential members, Brazil, had but three representatives, while others, such as Venezuela and India, had none. Only one black face was seen, and he a Frenchman; the entire continent of Africa was un-represented (though South African comrades had hoped to come, while another, from Zimbabwe, could do no more than express enthusiasm in advance), and the same was so for Asia (though a Nepalese Green tried mightily to make it). When one considers that the ecological crisis does not respect geographical boundary, that the majority of humankind lives in the South, and that the great axis of injustice and exploitation runs from North to South, it follows that by any rational standard the center of gravity for the EIN should be in the global South. It also follows that the EIN has a very long way to go.

As for the question of gender, the meeting was remarkably balanced in terms of numbers of women and men, but quite unremarkable when it came to who got to say and decide the most: the same old possessors of the y-chromosome (present company not excluded). This may seem by now a tedious lament; but the issue is not political correctness. Ecosocialism may be a long way from realization, however we are not totally in the dark as to what it must encompass. To a remarkable, perhaps unique, extent, ecosocialism is

distinguished from other varieties of socialism in insisting that the mending of nature needs to incorporate a profound transformation of gender relations. This goes far beyond the distributive justice of bourgeois feminism. Ecosocialism entails as well the revalorization, across all strata of society, of what had been degraded over centuries of patriarchy as mere “women’s work”—that is, ecosocialism must be ecofeminist. Contrast the immemorial quality of female labor as the tending of life with the horrendous assault on life under the regime of capital, and the necessity of ecofeminism within ecosocialism becomes sharply evident.

These matters surface in the kinds of discourses the various actors will bring to meetings of the EIN, and they will be worked out according to the kinds of spaces we provide for dialectical engagement. It seems to me in this respect that the paradigm for our theoretical work is less the traditionally expressed and rather simplistic notion of “red-green” convergence than it is the mutual encountering of discourses across the various axes of North/South and male/female as these are manifested in a myriad of organized forms. This is obviously not the place to take up so substantial a matter with anything like the depth it deserves. But I do not see the Ecosocialist International Network beginning to realize itself until, for example, the Marxist-Leninist (chiefly Trotskyist) tendencies that were influential in Montreuil are brought into dialectical engagement with the innumerable “subsistence perspectives” that lie, relatively dormant, in waiting across the South, including the “Southern enclaves” of industrial society, like New Orleans, South Durban, and the banlieues of Paris. Now that will be a meeting worth aspiring towards!

The next big opportunity will be the World Social Forum, to be held in Belem, Brazil, in January, 2009. In the meanwhile, consult: <http://www.ecosocialistnetwork.org/>.

—Joel Kovel