

Ecosocialism, Global Justice, and Climate Change

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So far it is only a word, plucked from the bin of radical possibility to concentrate the mind in this grim age of world-destroying capitalism. We call it “ecosocialism” because the times, as Hamlet put it, are “out of joint.” That which should fit together does not, and events cascade chaotically, threatening unprecedented disaster. “Eco” is the prefix, because the disjuncting is of nature. And “socialism?” We do not need to retrace here the trail leading to the lair of the perpetrator, capital, the “dis-jointer” of our time. Enough of that has been done, I think, to allow us to carry forward the imagining of a socialism predicated on the overcoming of capital as nature’s enemy as well as the exploiter of human labor. The path to ecosocialism has to be made by those who will travel upon it. But it also has to be imagined in advance, because the socialism of this present age, if it ever arises, will not much resemble its ancestors from the first epoch of the doctrine. And yet there is something that can be said about some of its principles by studying the lessons of the past, along with the workings of the ecological crisis and its most spectacular feature, global climate change.

A Tale of Two Epochs

A considerable number of struggles have emerged in recent times as harbingers of a society beyond capital—movements large and small, seemingly scattered everywhere, just as capital is everywhere, and just as the ecological crisis can strike everywhere. It is a kind of return of Guevara’s *foco* doctrine, where the foci are determined by points of ecological rupture driven in by the contradictions of accumulation—lands devastated in places like Ecuador or Nigeria by oil exploitation; failures of the state at points where the various threads of ecological crisis interweave into disaster, like New Orleans; borderlands where struggles over labor and migration converge; devastation of sugar cane workers in Brazil who produce biofuels; the poisoning of farmers, miners, bureaucrats and workers in China who can no longer take a deep breath, or whose skin is breaking out in cancers; and so on and on.

These focal points have the twofold property, first, of igniting the potential for local revolt, and second, of providing lessons as to the global potentials of resistance against the regime responsible for the devastation. Such lessons point to common ground beneath all the various instances of ecological breakdown and have the potential of drawing into the struggle each and every person regardless of position on the map, or how socialized. Neither the author of these words nor the average person who will read them have directly felt the devastation of the more immediate victims of the crisis just noted. But we are all in harm’s way and in the path of the crisis. And we are capable, as humans, of empathy and reasoning in terms of the whole, and these powers enable us to learn what the ecological crisis means and what to do about it.

The classical phase of socialism, its so-called “first epoch,” was a project to negate and overcome the effects of capital’s signature mode of exploitation, the conversion of labor

power to surplus value. Strikes and other work stoppages were strategies to impede this in workplaces configured by capitalist relations. As their limits became apparent, the project moved to the question of control over the workplace and eventually took upon itself the task of placing the state and the means of production in the hands of the workers themselves. In broad outline, this is how socialism came to be born.

The capitalist system displayed from its beginnings a profoundly imperialist impulse. Because its essential logic is to expand the purely quantitative, and hence unlimited, value term, and because the realization of value drags nature wantonly along with it without regard for the inherent regulation of ecosystems, the dominion of capital has been by far the most destructive phase of human history. This proclivity to lay waste and annihilate the pre-existing societies that stood in capital's way was evident in zones of expansion into the Western Hemisphere, Africa, and Australasia, and was theorized as such early in the last century by Luxemburg and, at its midpoint, by Polanyi. But well before then, in 1844, Engels had called attention to the devastation of the bodies of its proletarian workforce along with their communal life, an insight that Marx greatly advanced in *Capital*.

However Engels may have railed against the destruction of proletarian life-worlds in Manchester, or Marx saw fit to describe the worker under capital as a “crippled monstrosity,” neither the original Marxian socialists, nor those, like William Morris and Luxemburg, who came after and further developed the notion that capitalism had ruinous effects on bodies and environments, saw fit to subsume what was happening into an “ecological crisis” as such. The reason, plainly, was that the various insults to nature and the living bodies of workers had not taken on a self-expanding momentum in which they broke loose from their points of origin to consume nature at large. Until the middle of the last century, then, the wounds inflicted by accumulation were limited by the buffering mechanisms of the planet's ecology, or could be set aside in view of a relative abundance of resources. Beginning in the 1970s, however, these constraints began to break down at innumerable places. Experts began to talk of the “limits to growth,” and more ominously, of new developments within the ecosphere in which the very fabric of nature was becoming undone, as in climate change driven by the greenhouse effect, or massive and expanding species extinctions.

Now the victims of accumulation were no longer the immediate actors in the production process but the entire web of nature, including other creatures and the physico-chemical webs that connected them. However these patterns may have been set into motion by economic processes, once the effects appeared in the ecosphere, they moved rapidly around the planet. It has been said, for example, that the highest concentrations of dioxins on the planet are found in Polar Bears, thanks to the currents that spread these substances thousands of miles from points of production, and their biological concentration as they move up the feeding chain.

The distinction between “first epoch” socialism and the “present epoch” version, or ecosocialism, largely derives from the presence of these processes, which cannot be superimposed on the traditional categories of political economy. Nature had been broadly excluded from earlier generations of socialist thought despite Marx's admonition that it was just as essential a contributor to the generation of wealth as labor. Accumulation and the imperative of endless growth was largely accepted, therefore, by first-epoch socialism, whose

chief distinction with the ruling class in this respect was the distribution of the product and power relations at the workplace and in the state. Despite notable exceptions such as Morris and Luxemburg, nature became marginalized within socialist thought and more or less indifferently regarded as a gift to mankind, to be exploited at will. To minds shaped by first-epoch socialism, no less than the capitalist mentality they fought, the ecological crisis has seemed, therefore, more like an unprovoked ambush than the inexorable outcome of centuries of estrangement and domination.

Within the bourgeois order, the response to crisis has been to continue nature's subordination to "man," whether by commodifying the fiction called "natural capital" and inserting it into regulatory and economic mechanisms, or more broadly, by foregrounding technological solutions to the crisis, as though once the mechanisms of environmental disruption were fixed, things can go on as before. Al Gore has been lavishly honored as the prophet of overcoming climate change for doing just this. Gore led the way toward the planetary dead-end signified by the Kyoto protocols. And last year he agreed to work with billionaire Richard Branson on a project that would award the grand prize of \$25,000,000 to the lucky fellow who devised the best method of sequestering the carbon released by industrial emissions. Is ecosocialism to mimic these pathetic and mechanistic reforms? Will the greatest challenge in human history stimulate no deeper response than business-as-usual? The words of Albert Einstein on learning of the bombing of Hiroshima still resound: "Everything has changed except our way of thinking, because of which we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe."

Your Life or Your Money

Ecosocialism must be a new beginning because the ecological crisis signifies an end, whether of the succession of modes of production that lead to capitalism, or of civilization itself. Whatever survives the crisis will perforce be an evolutionary advance for humanity, one enabling us not just to endure, or "mitigate," as the buzzword puts it, but rather to heal an ancient lesion between humanity and nature, and thereby transcend our history. This entails a "revolution," but one radically different from the previous upheavals that bore the name. Ecosocialism will not be announced as cataclysm or Armageddon, although when it is done, the world will be transformed. It will not be spearheaded by a particular class, although it requires that all producers be given power over their means of production. Nor will it be signified by the overturning of a state, as the traditional view of revolution had held, although when the process is complete, the form and content of states will be radically different from what went before. Nor will it be the result of violence, although as the state is an instrument of violence and as capitalism will not give up without a fight, there will be violence from the system aplenty along its way, violence that has to be endured and overcome.

At heart, ecosocialism is an existential choice. It is rational in that it conduces to survival and a better life. However it does not arise through calculation or instrumental means, but rather by direct confrontation with the raw edge of things and a realignment of basic values. The notion of existence derives from the Latin, *exsistere*, or the *coming into being* of an entity. The multiplicity of movements from which ecosocialism arises are each points of such realization. When people rise up, they do so *against* an adversary and at the same

moment, *for* their own being. It is this common feature that allows the focal uprisings to come together in a common cause.

The present crisis differs from earlier ones in the presence of threats to nature both large and small deriving from the cancerous invasion of capital. We can describe this formally as a proliferating set of disintegrations of planetary ecosystems. But we do not see or experience the set in formal terms. We feel at that raw edge, rather, the menace to nature as a threat to *life*—to our lives and the lives of uncountable others. And so, ecosocialism is first and foremost, on behalf of life, and dedicated to life's flourishing as well as preservation. That is its existential core. The more deeply it is felt, the more widely will it surface into social transformation. In this light, capital is not merely an instrument of economic exploitation, but the angel of death, prepared by the endless fragmenting of ecosystems through the action of the principle of exchange. Ecosocialism struggles against capital, therefore, not only to secure the well-being of the underclasses, but on behalf of life itself—and by extension the firmament that sustains life. This imperative decenters both technocracy and economism, as unworthy signifiers of what we are. It puts in their place an ethic, *ecocentrism*, that gives primacy to the healing of nature and the enhancement of life.

This brings into focus certain themes which did not loom especially large in first-epoch socialism, or were neglected.

- Where there was no inherent impulsion within first-epoch socialism to look beyond human welfare, ecosocialism entails a radical shift away from the anthropocentric attitude that holds humanity over nature. Plainly, if life is under threat by capital, then the threat applies to all lives. Capital affects all creatures, songbirds as well as hogs, the latter directly, as a source of factory farmed commodities; and the former, indirectly, through the expansion that alters all habitats. The option for an ecocentric perspective, therefore, is not an instrumental choice affecting only those species of use to us as resources or domesticated helpers. It is rather a decentering from our narrow species interest toward a more universal perspective that encompasses the ecosphere: the plenum of ecosystems, and all creatures, which constitutes and frames human existence.

We do not, however, consider all creatures equivalently, but from the standpoint of interrelationships within and between ecosystems. There are bacteria on whom we depend for life, and bacteria whose life is the occasion for our disease, or our death, or who recycle our substance after we are gone. And there are creatures like songbirds who do not toil for us or provide food but are sites of disinterested pleasure, aesthetic joy and simple delight, and have done so, one would think, transhistorically, since the beginning of human time. Such creatural delights are not in themselves part of commodity circuits. Strictly speaking, they have no use values—though of course capital can insert these, and does, as in the bird seed, or bird feeder, or bird handbook, industries. They are creatures, rather, whose absence would be felt as a great rupture in our being. Existentially, they are points of wonder, not usefulness: “How do you know,” wrote William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way,/Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your sense five?”

The decentering of “Man as the measure of all things” does not descend to the level of certain vulgar forms of Deep Ecology, which, whether from ignorance or perhaps an excess of bitterness, eliminate what is distinctive about humanity in order to reduce us to the level of slime molds—and slime molds to the level of humans. As a species in nature, we humans are entitled to have our own corner of nature, i.e., “human nature,” respected. I would think that the human brain is the most complex structure in the universe, which is to say, it is the point at which nature achieves its null point of entropy, and perhaps because of this, becomes capable of regarding itself.

From a theoretical perspective, this means that ecosocialism entails different and more complex judgments of *value* than first-epoch socialism. It demands of us that we take into account a kind of valuation distinct from those values, attached to use and exchange, that enter into economic calculation. Once we open ourselves to the ecosphere, a realm of *intrinsic value* opens as well, a value inhering in ecosystemic being. Since we now place life in the center of the world and not mere profitability, and since life is a matter of ecosystemic integrity, so does the value intrinsic to ecosystemic relationship enter the thinking of ecosocialism. What is called an “ecocentric ethic” is essentially ethics in defense of intrinsic value. Simply put, it is the refusal to reduce the world to cash, and to knuckle under to the lords of economic calculation. It is the refusal of all fetishisms, of the commodity as well as the machine. This perspective becomes necessary in the overcoming of the ecological crisis, and therefore the climate crisis as well. It is the deepest level of the resistance to capital, and the foundation of all others.

- For Marx production was the essential core of human nature and the decisive element in the system of economic structures comprised by exchange, distribution, circulation, etc. Ecosocialism needs, however, to regard production itself ecosystematically, as the human point of intervention with ecosystems. This is the ground of the critique of production, now to be regarded from the standpoint of whether or not it enhances the *integrity* of ecosystems, to put it theoretically, the formative interrelations of elements in ecosystemic ensembles. Stripped of theoretic abstraction, this comes down to whether an instance of production enhances life itself.

Life is self-replicating form; and production is trans-formation. Therefore production is to be judged according to the quality of the forms it brings into existence. Consider the production of waste, which dogs capitalism, and is a sign of the disintegration of ecosystem. A look at a waste site (whether “toxic” or not is not the point here; from an ecosystemic perspective, all waste sites are toxic) reveals this instantly, and is also a microcosm of the planet as a whole under the regime of capital. “Waste” is the moment of consumption as it takes on a pseudo-independent zombie-existence within late-capitalist culture. Socialist as well as bourgeois economists have scarcely begun to criticize consumption; indeed, from every corner, we continue to hear that the overproduction endemic to capitalism is also *underconsumption*, as though this latter were a disease to be remedied by more consumption of more commodities—when in truth, the level of consumption

already imposed by capital is the immediate instigator of ecological crisis, and therefore, of the derangements of climate change.

- Ecosocialism needs to transform production itself, from a system centered about commodities to one in which the making of *integral ecosystems* is the center of social activity. This notion needs to be carefully defined, though only the briefest effort to do so can be made here. We consider an ecosystem to be a set of elements in nature internally and externally related such that they embody formal coherence, sometimes called “wholeness.” Integrity is then the maintenance of such form, not statically (for stasis does not exist in nature except as a transient boundary condition), but through a dynamism called *differentiation*, in which the elements are kept distinct yet interconnected; and this formal relationship continually develops and evolves. Disintegration, by contrast, entails the *splitting* apart of the elements of the ecosystem, and the loss of their coherence, their form, and their dynamism. The waste site is one such example; the separation of the producer from the means of production, another. In actual life, it needs be emphasized, the situation is by no means so neatly divided between integrality and disintegration. Since we inhabit a multiplicity of ecosystems, interacting levels of dynamic ensue: thus the prisoner can rally other dimensions of being to free himself; the worker alienated under capitalist exploitation can struggle to restore her freedom; the sinner can achieve redemption; a death can bring forth renewed life. Hence disintegration can become as a moment of reintegration; though whether it turns out as such is ultimately a political question.

This is another way of calling attention to the centrality of life for ecosocialist practice, since integrality of ecosystem is necessary for the preservation and advance of life. As a new mode of production, ecosocialism creates places in which this kind of process can flourish. Politically, the notion calls attention to the revalorization of *communal* forms as the sites of ecosocialist production, where the Commons, entailing collective ownership and mutual aid, is a kind of matrix for the putting of humans into ecosystemic relationship. A communal relationship poses the coming-into-being of integral human ecosystems and is therefore at the existential as well as the political heart of ecosocialism. This was already imagined in insights into communism, the “commune,” the “solidarity” of labor, etc.

- The emergence or restoration of Commons is a necessary condition for ecosocialism, but it would be foolish to regard this sentimentally. The Commons can disintegrate and degenerate into various tribalisms (including national chauvinisms), with the potential for racism, ethnocentricity, and murderous vendettas. From one side, we think of the Paris Commune as signifying the hope that ordinary people can rebuild the world free of alien state and class forces; however, in India, the term “communalism” has come to refer to episodes of mass murder between Hindu and Moslem communities. The key question is whether collectivity becomes imbued with a universal interest, or whether it becomes fixated in any of the splitting points laid down by the history of our estrangement. In the present crisis this dilemma is writ large; for looming ecocatastrophe can trigger racism, fascism and religious fundamentalisms, along with ethnocentricities such as Zionism, no less than the ecocentric values of ecosocialism.

- I should think that the original point at which splitting enters history is through the notion of gender, the foundation in human existence of the notion of difference. Awareness of gender difference is the moment in each life when the idea arises that there are two distinct versions of human being; this then propagates across all other aspects of the human world. Domination, in patriarchal form, developed archaically along this axis through the aggression of male hunting bands. Nature's differentiation between sexes became non-recognition and emerged as splitting, between selves and within the self. This inevitably extended back into nature. Now splitting became nature's "gendered bifurcation." Within this world-view, the real human being became masculine, while nature--dumb, passive and devoid of reason—remained behind as the eternal female. Thus gender violence is the template of nature's domination.

What is sundered can be rendered whole; thus the freeing of labor requires that labor be altered through overcoming the gendered bifurcation of nature. It is axiomatic that such labor as enhances life needs to be foregrounded within ecosocialism. This, however, is nothing other than those forms of production immemorially consigned to women and degraded with the "world-historical defeat" (Engels) of the female gender: giving birth, to be sure, but also the tending and nurturance of life, in all the meanings of these terms. An ecosocialist revolution, in its defense of life, will revalorize the kinds of work assigned to the female aspect of humanity. This is feminism as ecosocialist: ecofeminism. It incorporates the bourgeois feminism that demands distributive equality of the social product, but goes further, to call into question the productions of economism and demand in their place the making of integral ecosystems, which is to say, life itself, as women have from the beginning been given this role.

Justice, Freedom, and Ecological Integrity

Justice ideally means the mending of what has been torn apart. It only exists because the world is riddled with injustice. It is unfree and torn; and justice exists to put the world back together according to law. But actually existing justice is not necessarily just, either, because law as we know it is the Law of a certain place. In this world, law tends to be a concoction of men derived according to their social relations, which do not rise above the level of society. Women slain by their male relatives in certain communal settings because they sought a degree of autonomy and sexual freedom are said to receive the blows of divine justice, when all they receive is the death-dealing of patriarchy, the male-principle severed from life; similarly, in cases of capital punishment in the United States or China, it is proclaimed that justice has been done, when all that has been accomplished is the demonstration of state power and the recycling of revenge. We return to our reflections on the Commons: just as the Commons degenerates to tribalism absent a universal moment, so is it necessary that the Law to which justice hews become a universal law, above the state, above patriarchy, and most definitely above capital and its private property.

Though we never fully attain the universal given the limits of human being, we are able to appreciate it through the lens provided by a given level of society. This is the deeper meaning of "progress": that a certain degree of development may give a vantage on the universal denied to its predecessor. In our time the ecological crisis shapes the universal as

the valuation of life in order not to collectively perish—an old insight, no doubt, but rendered urgent when articulated against the grim lessons of industrialization and imperialism. Therefore the Law to which justice presently hews is that of ecological integrity, while injustice is a manifestation of ecological disintegration, the falling apart of the world. Justice, likewise, takes on a directly ecological character: what is “justly just” is what fosters the bringing of humanity together according to freely associated labor pursuing ecocentric ends. In a world under the gun of climate change and other species of capital-induced annihilation, justice necessarily acquires an ecosocialist form.

There is a twofold aspect to justice within ecosocialism. First, the category applies to each and every creature from the standpoint of its relationship to human agency. It makes no sense to speak of the wolf’s injustice to the elk, or of any predatory relationship unmediated by human value and its social form. It is “Man’s” injustice to nature that is in the dock here.

The second ecological aspect of justice concerns those injuries suffered by humans at the hands of other humans. This is distinguished from the first case by the fact that the victim also has the capacity to fight back and right what is wrong. We return to the “foci” of struggle at the points where capital’s invasion of lived space sets going a reaction of “common” people to restore the integrity of their lives. Here justice initially takes its specifically *environmental* form, in which the particular lesion—a flood, inundation by toxins, and so forth—will be addressed by collective action, including the petitioning of state authorities. Notably consistent with the above reasoning, these measures are more often than not, led by women.

The particular points of outbreak of the ecological crisis which lead to activism are, generally speaking, instances of this unjust “being in harm’s way”: the victims of Katrina, of Bhopal, of petroleum extraction in the Niger River delta or the Ecuadorean forests, those who live next to petroleum refineries in South Durban, or next to toxic waste sites—all the desolation of the great disease which has attacked the earth through the agency of the human pest *qua* capitalist.

What is environmental, however, can also be universalized as the *ecological*, when the larger connections are drawn to other domains of struggle, and inevitably, to the common cause that unites all these struggles and gives them a class-content. This ensues immediately from the siting decisions that put poor and marginalized peoples in harm’s way, and on a larger scale, because of the inexorable economic and imperial criteria that determine the decisions of capitalists. The universal appears, then, in the transformation of environmental justice to *ecological justice*, whose logical integration will be into ecosocialism. Here the state is not merely addressed: the existing “state of affairs” is overthrown.

These principles extend directly into the politics of overcoming climate change, the only coherent ground of which is ecosocialist. We recognize climatic pollution with carbon (and other agents, to be sure) to be the effluvia of capital’s expansion through industrialization, and we set the overall goal of transformation as the overthrow of the mechanism of cancerous growth. This goal, however, is realized through particular and distinct paths, from South to North and unified by an ecosocialist ethos of fidelity to life and the free development of all creatures. Such technology as is necessary to move to a non-toxic civilization—renewable energy, for example, or universally available (and free) mass

transportation—are only conceivable in a society defined by “people’s power” and democratic planning. Therefore, overthrowing the capitalist class is essential for moving forward in all dimensions of the struggle for an inhabitable world.

Similarly, measures to mitigate atmospheric carbon are puerile without bringing down the capitalist ruling class and breaking its power over climate protocols. Only a massive uprising from below can accomplish this—as by blocking the forthcoming passage of successors to the Kyoto protocols next year in Copenhagen. This in turn requires a “movement of movements,” coalescing from innumerable site-specific focal reactions to the invasion of capital, especially as this leads to the destruction of lived space by petroleum extraction (including the shale deposits of Alberta, exploitation of which is leading to a veritable ecological Holocaust). The unifying force of such movements can only be conjugation of anti-capitalism with ecocentric valuation of life itself, which is to say, again, a developing ecosocialism.

These various principles converge in the rule that to survive global warming will be feasible to the extent carbon is kept in the ground in the first place. Accordingly, we are led to the twofold strategy, first, as observed above, of supporting all efforts in the periphery that preserve lived space against invasive carbon extraction; and second, and more universal, remaking society so that it lives far, far more lightly on the earth, thereby ceasing to require the carbon fix, and able to employ alternative technologies. We insist again, however, that the basic problem is not technological, but the way we transform nature and consume the results of our labor. This, too, can only be rationally approached through an ecosocialist ethos inasmuch as the only cure for the disease that is consumerism will be the universalization of freely associated labor, applied ecocentrically. It will require the fruition of human being, as a creative part of nature, to overcome the curse of “having,” capital’s induced possessiveness, that now rules the world.

Ecosocialism will be judged by its fidelity to these goals. But it offers more. By placing life in the center of our existence, it places us in the center of life, and better able to bear the hardships ahead. For there will be much suffering to come, and most definitely no assurance of a happy ending to this tale. Better by far to face this in the spirit of renewal and dignity for life than to succumb to the cold and dark dead end signified by a dying capitalism.