

## **Introduction to the Symposium: Socialism and Ecology**

With this issue of *CNS*, we inaugurate a series of critical essays devoted to the ecological relations of 20th century socialist societies, by examining the complex legacy of the Soviet bloc.

The rubble of collapsing socialisms has largely buried both the hope they once offered to the world and the memory of their achievement. Only the bitter odor of failure lingers, mingled with the echoes of derision. This has taken shape as a threefold condemnation: “actually existing socialism” failed to produce the goods demanded of a modern economy, delivering instead empty shelves and shoddy consumer items; it failed to bring about a democratic polity, suffocating the people instead under bureaucracy and police; and it failed to regulate the metabolism between humanity and nature, leading to ecological devastation on a grimmer scale than even capitalist industrialization had managed to accomplish.

None of this is false; yet all of it is inadequately rendered, chiefly because most reckonings of socialism remain under the spell of capitalist ideology and triumphalism. Several kinds of defects are embedded in the facile rejections of 20th century socialism, beginning with the conception of socialism itself. This is too-often treated monolithically, with little distinction of the variants of socialist societies from one another, or of their self-images from notions derived from other strands of the socialist tradition, including the work of Marx. Associated with this, there is a widespread if unspoken assumption that socialism is like turning a switch. Either it is on or off, no regard being given to the actual complexities of society or to the fact that socialism is a kind of process, a setting into motion of a basic shift in social priorities. Once state power is gained by socialist forces, a dynamic manifold is set going: changes take place at one place, only to provoke opposition at another; just so, certain things are suppressed

while others are brought into existence in a surprising way, and so on. Freedom and unfreedom can, after all, co-exist in societies as well as individuals. Nor is it adequately considered that socialism, like capitalism, is more than an economic, legal or political arrangement. As Engel-DiMauro's contribution to this series makes clear, for example, socialisms are deeply involved in gender relations, often in ways entirely unconscious to the actors. And the same could be said for cultural or aesthetic dimensions.

In sum, the standard treatment of "actually existing socialism" removes the existence of socialism from the rich determination of history. Its claim is that all we need to know is that 20th century socialism failed and fell. Therefore, the reasoning goes, it never produced anything worth while, even as a lesson to learn from.

In our view, the barrenness of this conception is especially notable with respect to the question of ecological degradation. The necessity of the critique of socialism and ecology is, we should think, transparently given by the current global ecological crisis. As it becomes increasingly clear that degradation of the planetary ecology is driven by uncontrollable capital accumulation, so must the thinking of those wishing to restore the integrity of global ecosystems turn to the building of a society beyond capital. The old watchword of "socialism or barbarism" now takes on the additional, life-threatening meaning of barbarism as ecocatastrophe. Repressed for a generation by the weight of the notion that no alternative to capital could possibly exist, the idea now begins to arise that such an alternative must be found if we are to have a future.

It follows that reflection into the ecological history of those social experiments of the last century that attempted, however imperfectly, to surpass capitalism is essential. We would ask: was socialism's ecological record really so one-sided? Was there a potential for ecological integrity within first-epoch socialism, along with the instrumental and destructive practices *vis à vis* nature? And, crucially, to what degree were these various tendencies related to the persistence of capitalist ways within socialist society? In other words, were these societies not socialist enough — and was the failure to overcome capitalist/eco-destructive ways a reason why first-epoch socialism fell? These are all highly practical concerns, given the present ecological crisis. Behind them stands the greater question of whether "actually existing socialism" was in fact "first-epoch socialism," and whether a truer, next-epoch socialism in harmony with nature can be built for the future.

Our series begins with an examination of the USSR, widely despised as an utter failure from an ecological standpoint. Arran Gare convincingly gives the lie to this simplistic reading of Soviet history. Gare's "The Environmental Record of the Soviet Union" pulls together the remarkable story of early Soviet ecological practices, and their eventual wrecking under Stalin. Gare reveals Lenin's own ambiguity, the powerful influence of Bogdanov and Lunacharskii, and the persistence of an environmental movement even under Stalinist repression. Far from making a one-dimensional indictment of Soviet environmentalism, Gare sees its failings as do to insufficient socialist transformation.

"Environmental Policy and the Environmental Movement in East Germany," by Dieter Rink (himself an East German activist in the 1989 revolution, and now a fellow at an environmental research center in Leipzig) describes the surprisingly forward-looking environmental protection policies in the GDR, and the forces that undermined these ideals, resulting in terrible air and water pollution. The paper then shows how the democracy movement grew out of the peace and ecology movements, which were at first "official" and then — as official hypocrisy became more apparent — independent. These small movements led to mass demonstrations, and eventually the breach in the Berlin wall in 1989 and the end of "first epoch socialism."

Lastly, in Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro's "Gender Relations, Political Economy, and the Ecological Consequences of State-Socialist Soil Science," we follow the development of soil science in Hungary during the Soviet period. Engel-Di Mauro exposes the intimate interconnections between patriarchal relations, soil science practice, and industrialized agriculture in state-socialist Hungary and shows how these interconnections produced an increase in soil degradation. By contrast, subsistence farming on individual parcels of land by women resulted in more favorable ecological practices than those of large-scale and centrally imposed agricultural techniques. This connection is not seen as essentialist, but rather as contingent upon the specific circumstances by means of which women had been socialized to be more caring of the integrity of the land.

In future issues we hope to continue this line of exploration by examining other facets of the ecological history of socialism, including, to be sure, the all-important instance of China, along with other Asian socialisms, and the story of Cuba and its breakthrough into organic agriculture. — **The New York CNS editorial group**