

The Enemy of Nature and the Nature of the Enemy

By Walt Contreras Sheasby and Derek Wall

1. Introduction

“I feel sure,” William Morris told his fellow socialists gathered at Kelmscott House in 1884, “that the time will come when people will find it difficult to believe that a rich community such as ours, having such command over external Nature, could have submitted to live with a mean, shabby, dirty life as we do.”¹ One hundred eighteen years ago, Morris was imagining a time “when no one was allowed to injure the public by defiling the natural beauty of the earth.”²

As Joel Kovel spells out in this new book, we are further from that goal today than when the dedicated late-Victorian radical, “whose thought was consciously ecocentric, albeit without using that term,”³ penned his novel of the socialist future, *News from Nowhere*.

Kovel has been working to bring activists and academics together, and he recently published an Ecosocialist Manifesto⁴ signed by a number of others who agree with William Morris that a “Great Change” in the way we treat “nature” is long overdue. In the system of commodity production, Morris once said, people had tried to make

¹A. L. Morton, ed., *Political Writings of William Morris* (New York: International Publishers, 1973), p. 153.

²*Ibid.*, p. 238.

³Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World* (New York: Zed Books, 2002), p. 209.

⁴Joel Kovel and Michael Löwy, “An Ecosocialist Manifesto,” *CNS*, 13, 1, March, 2002, pp. 1-2. A discussion group open to readers of this journal is at <Ecosocialists@yahoogroups.com>.

“nature” their slave, “since they thought ‘nature’ was something outside them.”⁵ In liberating nature, of course, we are freeing ourselves.

The world today is far shabbier and the public is injured far more than when Morris wrote, and Kovel is dealing with a level of ecodestruction many magnitudes worse. In fact, given the trajectory he outlines, the biosphere itself, not simply the appearance of the human habitat, is what is threatened: “Put more formally, the current stage of history can be characterized by structural forces that systematically degrade and finally exceed the buffering capacity of nature with respect to human production, thereby setting into motion an unpredictable yet interacting and expanding set of ecosystemic breakdowns.”⁶

Kovel’s task in *The Enemy of Nature* is to “understand the social dynamics of the crisis, and to see whether anything can be done about them.”⁷ This is a book designed to persuade and galvanize, and it is written in such a lively and witty style that teachers can be confident that it will hold the attention of students. Whether the classroom focus is on social change movements or economic globalization or ecological philosophies, Kovel’s inexpensive paperback will prep students for the task of being world citizens in an era of unprecedented stress between nature and humanity.

Kovel’s book is aimed at all those who are willing to seriously consider the links between *ecology* and *economy*. As he says, “Growing numbers of people are beginning to realize that capitalism is the uncontrollable force driving our ecological crisis, only to become frozen in their tracks by the awesome implications of the thought.”⁸

Kovel asks the reader to think through the central problem: “*What is at the root of capital’s wanton ecodestructivity?*” Any solution to the ecological crisis must address the nature of economic development: “One way of seeing this is in terms of an economy geared to run on the basis of unceasing accumulation. Thus each unit of capital must, as the saying goes, “grow or die,” and each capitalist must constantly search to expand markets and profits or lose his position in the hierarchy.”⁹

⁵Clive Wilmer, ed., *William Morris: News From Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 200.

⁶Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 21. On this “tipping” see “Study Finds Earth’s Ecosystems on Verge of Sudden Collapse,” *Nature*, October 11, 2001.

⁷Kovel, *op. cit.*

⁸*Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 115.

But the book is not only an introduction to the ecological crisis. The already engaged intellectual will find in this work a penetrating look at the political and theoretical crises of the international left, a dimension that we will stress in this review. While some of the most vexing problems of socialism today were already taken up by Marx, Kovel raises them anew, this time in the context of capitalist globalization and the ecological crisis.

2. Re-aiming the Marxian Canon

Kovel's work is similar to that of William Morris in a crucial respect, in that both found it necessary to question the adequacy of contemporary socialism. Kovel's work interrogates the socialist models, but it also raises questions about "the original Marxian canon as the true and sufficient guide to save nature from capitalism."¹⁰

That confrontation frames many of the themes in Kovel's lively but complex and comprehensive presentation of *ecosocialism*, a paradigm which paradoxically is both based on Marx and on "the criticism of Marx in the light of that history to which he had not been exposed, namely of the ecological crisis."¹¹

While there are many recent books in political ecology that take aim at Marx as an "advocate of technological determinism, of productivism, of the ideology of progress, and of hostility to rural life and primitivism," this is not one of them.¹² Kovel's immanent criticisms are very reasonable and reflect a better understanding of Marx's project: "A close reading will show Marx to be no Promethean," an exoneration recorded by others as well.¹³

While any breach in the consensus excluding Marx from the foundations of ecology is very welcome, Kovel's more important contribution to the ecosocialist project is the original sociological analysis of some of the most vexing issues facing the international left as it surveys and measures the "socialist" alternatives of past and present.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 211; See Walt Sheasby, "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: The Real and the Myth in Green Theory," *Organization & Environment*, 12, 1, March, 1999; John Bellamy Foster, "The Canonization of Environmental Sociology," *Organization & Environment*, 12, 4, December, 1999.

3. Preconditions and Prefigurations

“...*what is...to what could be.*” Following Kovel, we can organize our issues using the three stages in the sociology of revolutionary change:¹⁴

1. The pre-revolutionary period in which tension mounts, the old authority loses its legitimacy, and the opposition is radicalized.
2. The period of conflicts and parallel institutions leading up to the revolutionary seizure of power.
3. The period of the revolutionary transformation of the old social order, beginning with the consolidation of governance and proceeding to the program of social reconstruction.

There is a detailed and increasingly sophisticated body of literature that examines how movements emerge, create collective identities, transform the consciousness of participants and create alternatives.¹⁵ Today’s social movement theory, while it does not provide a set of prescriptions, is an important resource for strategic and tactical mobilizations.

In the first stage of revolutionary change, Kovel stresses the importance of *prefigurations* and *preconditions*. That the first question we need to raise — *Are the preconditions for revolutionary change present?* — is not a simple one, is shown by the revisions in Marx’s thought. Looking at the experience of national liberation movements since Marx’s time, it is hard to disagree with his 1845 judgment: “...people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity.”¹⁶

Compare this with Kovel’s verdict on the attempt to build socialism in underdeveloped lands: “...they were economically weak to begin with and unable to meet even the basic needs of their people.” “In case after case, the elementary conditions for socialist development in the period after revolutionary victory were not present or crushed.”

¹⁴Kovel, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 200-206.

¹⁵Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (Hereafter *CW*), vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 38.

“...[N]ot only were these models not exportable, but they were primed to self-destruct.”¹⁷

As Kovel points out, communist insurrections go back a long way. In an obvious attempt to search for precursors, Marx and Engels studied the medieval laborers “who carried out revolts against the whole municipal order” and the peasants in the “great risings of the Middle Ages,” citing a number of instances in their *German Ideology*.¹⁸

At the chiliastic edge of the Reformation, there had been a number of attempts to create a New Jerusalem within medieval society, all of which were brutally crushed, but with the ultimate result that, according to Marx and Engels, “The old feudal aristocracy was, for the most part, annihilated in the peasant wars.”¹⁹ As Engels put it, “Anticipation of communism by human fantasy was in reality anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions.”²⁰

These uprisings often took on a religious communist aspiration, and, as Engels pointed out in 1850, the plebeian clergy “gave the movement its theorists and ideologists, and many of them, representatives of the plebeians and peasants, died on the scaffold.”²¹ These were not dreamers of impeccable utopian colonies like those settled in the 19th century, but leaders of desperate insurgencies.

Communes formed more or less briefly under the maverick Wyclifite John Ball in Kent, England, in 1381-82; the Hussite Jan Zizka in Tabor, Bohemia, in 1420-24; the Anabaptists Thomas Muenzer of Muelhausen, Thuringia, in 1524-25, Jacob Hutter in Moravia in 1526-36, Bernard Rothmann in Muenster in 1533-35; and the Quaker layman Gerard Winstanley of the Diggers in Surrey, England, in 1649.²² A recurrent theme in various European locales over hundreds of years was the attempt to reclaim the “commons.”

¹⁷Kovel, *op. cit.*, pp. 200, 202-203.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 66, 204.

¹⁹Marx and Engels, *CW*, vol. 5, p. 194.

²⁰Frederick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York: International Publishers, 1966), pp. 41-42. For a more nuanced view, see Jason W. Moore, “The Crisis of Feudalism: An Environmental History,” *Organization & Environment*, 15, 3, September 2002, p. 307.

²¹Engels, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

²²Marx studied some of these leaders from original documents. Kevin Brownlow, director and co-writer of the film *Winstanley* noted that “Marx is known to have studied the same pamphlets [by Winstanley] in the British Museum that we worked from” <http://www.milestonefilms.com/pdf_press/Winstanley.pdf>.

The Taborite communism that sprang up briefly in Bohemia in the 1420s proclaimed: “As in the city of Tabor there is no ‘mine’ and no ‘yours’ but all is in common, the like it shall be everywhere and nobody shall have a special property, and those who have such property commits a mortal sin.”²³ The Hutterites likewise proclaimed, “Private property is the enemy of love.”²⁴ John Ball supposedly preached that “Things cannot go well in England, nor ever will, until everything shall be in common”²⁵

Marx pointed out: “In all previous periods, however, the abolition [Aufhebung] of individual economy, which is inseparable from the abolition of private property, was impossible for the simple reason that the material conditions required were not present.”²⁶

In particular the insufficient productive force meant there could be no increase in well-being: “The setting-up of a communal domestic economy presupposes the development of machinery, the use of natural forces and of many other productive forces — e.g., of water-supplies, gas-lighting, steam-heating, etc., the supersession [Aufhebung] of town and country. Without these conditions a communal economy would not in itself form a new productive force; it would lack material basis and rest on a purely theoretical foundation, in other words, it would be a mere freak and would amount to nothing more than a monastic economy...”²⁷ Such a regime could not abolish deprivation, but only enforce general austerity.

4. Toward an Appropriate Mode of Production

“What might an ecosocialist society look like?”²⁸ The issue of which technologies are appropriate and which are not has long been an issue to socialists imagining the future and concerned with the degradation of labor demanded by capitalist technology: “All this conflicts with, for example, the antiquated view of earlier modes of production according to which the city authorities would, for instance, prohibit inventions so as not to deprive workers of their livelihood. In

²³Henry Gremming, *Our History*, 2002 <<http://felix2.2y.net/english/index.html>>.

²⁴Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 193.

²⁵A. L. Morton, *A People’s History of England* <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/ora/prim_lib_com.html>.

²⁶Marx and Engels, *CW, op. cit.*, Vol. 5, pp. 75-76.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

such a society the worker was an end in himself...”²⁹ Most readers might attribute such an observation to William Morris, but it was made by Marx in 1863-64.

It is well known that William Morris, as Kovel says, “thought in terms of a production that incorporated craft and the aesthetic dimension.”³⁰ Nevertheless, it is rarely noted that Morris emphasized his openness to scientific engineering in his vision of the socialist future: “All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery.” Morris foresaw an end to coal combustion. “Banded-workshops,” or what used to be called factories, give off no smoke. In his vision, coal-burning steam-powered transport on land and sea has been replaced by “force-vehicles,” which speed along “without any means of propulsion visible,” leaving the air unpolluted by fossil fuel.³¹ The restoration of the natural environment, in Morris’ conception, was not to be accomplished by Luddism, or the simple wrecking of machines.

To those reformers who argue today that considerations of technological preconditions or future development may not be necessary or even desirable,³² Kovel responds: “...technology does not stand in the way: it is part of the way. Technology is not a collection of techniques and tools but a pattern of social relationships...”³³ “...to begin seeing a machine or a technique as fully participant in the life of ecosystem is to begin removing it from exchange and restoring a realized use-value.”³⁴ The qualitative development of the productive forces in tandem with the expansion of human cooperation and the contraction of resource depletion, may be our only hope of a genuinely sustainable metabolism.

5. The Signal-fire in the East

“...to break loose from capital...”³⁵ The year before his death, Marx revised his long-held view that socialism could only be built in the most industrialized Western nations: “If the Russian Revolution

²⁹Karl Marx, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” in an Appendix to *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (Middlesex and New York: Penguin Books and Random House, 1976), p. 1050.

³⁰Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

³¹Wilmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 82, 185.

³²See Stephanie, Mills, ed., *Turning Away from Technology: A New Vision for the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997).

³³Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 9.

becomes the signal for proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia's peasant communal land-ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development."³⁶

Thirty-five years later, a socialist revolution took power in Russia. The triumph of the *Soviets* (councils established by workers and soldiers) in 1917 was however a pyrrhic one. As Kovel says: "After Stalin's accession to power in 1927, persistent economic stagnation triggered a second revolution, now from above. Whatever democratic impulses had endured through the early period of the Bolshevik regime were jettisoned, and the entire weight of Soviet society was concentrated on building the forces of production for all-out accumulation. The result was utter top-down control..."³⁷

Left out of this account, however, is the tragic defeat of the German insurrection of 1918 and subsequent postwar uprisings in much of Europe. As Lenin realized, "...if there were no revolutionary movement in other countries, [the 1917 Revolution] would be hopeless....Our salvation from all these difficulties, I repeat, is an all-European revolution."³⁸ Had these revolts succeeded, Marx's 1882 thesis might have been realized, sparing the world the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s.

6. Prefiguration as a Living Model

"*What is to be done?*"³⁹ Not all prefigurative intentional communities succumbed irretrievably to repression and the emerging capitalist mode of production. Marx had studied the medieval religious communists as forerunners of modern working class communism, and Kovel examines a communistic branch of the modern-day descendants of the pacifist Anabaptist Jakob Hutter, executed in 1536.

Many Marxists would argue that it is impossible to build islands of socialism within the capitalist totality. But consider *Bruderhof*. One of eight intentional communities linked together by telecommunications and an air fleet, the *Bruderhof* (community of

³⁶Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Preface to the Russian Edition of 1882, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 56. See Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review, 1983).

³⁷Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

³⁸Quoted in John Rees, "In Defense of October," *International Socialism*, 52, Autumn, 1991, p. 7.

³⁹Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

brethren) in the town of Rifton in the Hudson River Valley, with whom Kovel has worked politically, serves him as a *prefiguration* of the production of use-values.

Kovel argues that “the key points of activity are “prefigurative,” in that they contain within themselves the germ of transformation; and “interstitial,” in that they are widely dispersed in capitalist society.”⁴⁰ Even though the *Bruderhof* do not exemplify *ecofeminism* or *ecocentrism*, they do embody social values far beyond *possessive individualism*. What we need to understand is that the *Bruderhof* is not simply an anachronism, like the medieval jousts and faires staged today in tinsel town.

The *Bruderhof* access and embrace modern technology and communications, are integrated into the capitalist market through the marketing of their sophisticated products, and yet, bound by their intense belief system, live without wages or personal wealth. The *Bruderhof* experiment raises anew a question Marxists had long supposed to be answered in the negative: *Is it possible under capitalism to create permanent havens of alternative ways of living?* The success and continuity of this living model of communism, now 476 years old, is stressed by Kenneth Rexroth in his historical study of communalism:

With a system of production and distribution far better organized than anything else at the time the colonies grew wealthy. Since they believed individually in living in “decent poverty,” they soon accumulated considerable surpluses, particularly after the colonies were permitted to sell their products to Gentiles. These surpluses were invested in capital improvements and in the subsidizing of new colonies, a necessity, as it still is today, because of the high birth-rate, and low death-rate, in those days due to their exemplary public health. The Hutterites had discovered a dynamic, continuously expanding economy of the type that Marx would later diagnose as the essence of capitalism, but this was a communist economy and it was based on a very high level of peasant prosperity, the source of its accumulation of capital.⁴¹

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Kenneth Rexroth, *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974) <<http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/communalism3.htm>>.

Kovel thinks that the emergence of a transformative ecosocialist movement depends on the commitment to a belief system emphasizing ecological production rather than endless consumption: "...the ideal of growth as such needs to be scrapped. *Sufficiency* makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks health care or succor in old age. This can be done at a fraction of the current world output and would create the ground for ecological realization."⁴² Ecological ensembles should aim to decommodify society, promoting use value and shrinking exchange value.

Marx likewise rejected the shimmering fantasy of Cornucopia, which promised "...to raise the workers to the dignity of rational consumers, so that they 'make a market' for the 'things showered on them' by civilization and the progress of invention."⁴³ As noted by James O'Connor, "[Marx] did theorize the value content of the consumption...but not in any depth the use values that make up the basket itself."⁴⁴

As Marxian activists have long realized, practical experience helps shape consciousness, and one cannot go very far in "writing recipes...for the cook-shops of the future."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, as Kovel argues, "Ecosocialism now reveals itself as a struggle for use-value — and through a realized use-value, for intrinsic value."⁴⁶ Kovel's book does point tentatively toward a synthesis of a theory of needs, a theory of belief systems, and a theory of social movements, although much more work needs to be done.⁴⁷

⁴²Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

⁴³Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 2 (Middlesex and New York: Penguin Books and Random House), 1978, p. 592.

⁴⁴James O'Connor, "On Social Needs," *CNS*, 8, 4, December, 1997, p. 58. However, see Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Alison & Busby, 1974).

⁴⁵Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (Middlesex and New York: Penguin Books and Random House, 1976), p. 99.

⁴⁶Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁴⁷Hopefully, Kovel will take this up in relation to Hegelian, Lukacsian and Freudian Marxism, contributions barely acknowledged in this work, although central to the concerns of his *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Warner, NH: Glad Day Books, 1999).

7. Assembling the Ecological Ensembles

The question that we need to address at this point and that Kovel pursues in his final chapters is: “*How do we fight for ecosocialism?*”⁴⁸ He does not prescribe a detailed path to a sustainable and just society. Indeed there are a number of reasons why no clear or single strategy is possible. First, the task is so large and complex that a certain openness would seem to be pragmatic. Second, pluralism will be vital not only for reasons of democracy but also so that strategic and tactical experiments can be made. Finally, political and cultural opportunities are vastly different in particular areas of the world despite the acceleration of globalization.

That the characterological grip of consumerism is bound up with the potential for liberation is an irony brought out by the London May Day Collective.

The great irony of capitalism is that whilst it clothes itself in the mantle of freedom and dons the mask of justice it is in fact based on neither of these. Capitalist society requires a specific social structure and a precise form of “individual.” A whole culture machine is geared to create such a set up. Modern society is based on control, discipline and imposed order. Not only of the world it seeks to exploit but, just as significantly, of those who make it up and are supposed to benefit from it.⁴⁹

While capitalism is a process motored by contradictions, its internal clashes in turn spark potential alternatives. The myriad crisis tendencies of capitalism are tightly articulated, but they demand more teasing out than anyone has provided.

Why is it, for instance, that the *alternative institutions* that absorb so much radical creative energy do not even begin to go beyond an amorphous *counter culture* to form *communities of resistance*? Could these ever assemble themselves into a *counter infrastructure*? “It must be that an important reason cooperatives, organic farms, and so on succumb to capital’s force field is the lack of an offsetting belief-system that enables them to renounce profitability.”⁵⁰ Kovel points out that

⁴⁸For a view of the contribution to the anti-capitalism movement in Europe of former Deep Ecology activists see Derek Wall, *Earth First! and the Anti-Roads Movement* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴⁹London May Day Collective, 2001, p. 38.

⁵⁰Kovel, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

“...the *internal* cooperation of freely associated labour is forever hemmed in and compromised by the force field of value expansion embodied in the Market...”⁵¹ Nevertheless, he argues that “a considerable amount of industrial production [is] open to the incursions of developing ecological ensembles, so long as these are protected from the force field through a heightened anti-capitalist intentionality.”

Even for workers outside such organizing, there is hope in the fact that “the class struggle has become internationalized in the face of globalization, and even begun to take on an ecological consciousness,”⁵² with a consequent universalizing moment emerging in labor politics. Moreover, ecosocialist politics, as Kovel notes, have begun to articulate with liberation movements in the south of the globe. As Kovel says, “Ecosocialism must be international or it is nothing.”⁵³

The fight for ecosocialism in the 21st century will have continuities and discontinuities with the communist visions of the past. That was realized by William Morris when he put these words into the mouth of the Victorian socialist time-traveler who tells of *A Dream of John Ball*: “...I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name....”⁵⁴

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 234. The Zapatistas, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and the Free Papua movement come to mind.

⁵⁴A. L. Morton, *Three Works by William Morris* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), p. 53.