

The Lessons of the Community of Brethren*

By Joel Kovel

There are, in the Eastern United States as well as the Dakotas, adjacent Canada and England, communities of Christian followers of Jakob Hutter (d. 1536), founder of the pacifist branch of the Anabaptists. This offshoot of the Radical Reformation, having endured the persecutions attendant upon their kind, found their way to the New World, where they built agricultural communes and prospered. In the 20th century, a similar branch arose in Germany under the leadership of Eberhard and Emmy Arnold, first as a Christian pacifist collective, then as a Hutterite intentional community. Persecuted by the Nazis, they fled to Paraguay and built an agricultural commune. In the 1950s they came to the United States, where, under the name of “Bruderhof,” they settled in Rifton, a town in New York’s Hudson River Valley. By now, the Bruderhof (a Hutterite term for “community of brethren”) had separated from the original Hutterites, who found them too much in the world. The worldliness of the Bruderhof included a shift from agricultural to industrial production, with an associated embrace of technology. They entered the business of making high-value learning aids for schools and disability centers. While the commodities so produced never captured more than a small share of this market, the realized profit was

*This is the first part of the eighth chapter, “Prefiguration,” of *The Enemy of Nature* (London: Zed, 2001), in which I argue for the intrinsically eco-destructive character of capital, and attempt to develop a vision, called “ecosocialism,” of its supersession. The material presented here launches the work’s conclusion as the building of a ground for ecosocialist politics. The argument proceeds after this excerpt into a critique of socialism, the positing of an “ecological production,” and the laying out of a possible path toward its realization through an ecosocialist revolution.

considerable and enabled the community to grow. Once a Bruderhof community reaches a certain size, say 300-400, it “hives,” dividing and forming a new unit elsewhere. In this way, there have now arisen six Bruderhofs in the United States and two more in England, linked by dedicated phone lines, so that all eight communities can be placed in instant contact with each other simply by picking up a receiver and pressing a button. They have their own publishing house as well, Plough Books, through which their ideas can be disseminated; and I am also told that they possess a small fleet of aircraft, bought with the profits from their business.¹

There are a number of interesting things to be said about the Bruderhof — whom, it should be added, I have visited on a number of occasions, and worked with on several projects:

First, the Bruderhof thrive in the capitalist market. They make fine and useful objects, using sophisticated machinery, computers and a functioning distribution and sales network, including catalogues, trucks, and so on. In short, they are successfully integrated into the economy.

Second, Bruderhof are radically non-capitalist. The “value” added onto and extracted from their learning aids derives from the capitalist market at large. Surplus-value from the point of production does not figure into this picture. No value is added from their own labor, for the plain reason that the Bruderhof are communists. In the enterprises from which their money is made, they are all paid the same amount: nothing. Nor is there any hierarchy within the factory; there is division of labor, of course, but no boss. The plant managers have no particular authority beyond their differentiated task. A visitor to the plant is greeted with a starkly different scene from what obtains in the standard capitalist workplace. Workers self-direct, come and go at different hours, punch no time-clocks. Time is not bound, nor is work dominated by considerations of productivity. Octogenarians and seven-year-old children work side by side as they please, sharing in the labor. There is no contradiction between this relatively indifferent productivity and the profitability of their factories, because the Bruderhof are not driven to accumulate and increase market share, but are content with sufficient incremental profit to meet their needs, which is made possible by the technology at their disposal. Work is driven by the desire to make fine objects and the larger ends to which the work is put.

¹Benjamin Zablocki, *The Joyful Community* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), presents the early history. A great deal of information is also available through Plough publications.

Third, being communists, the Bruderhof hold “all things in common.” Beyond a few minor personal possessions, they have no individual property — no cars, no DVD players, no designer jeans, no subscriptions to *Self* and *Connoisseur* magazines. The community takes care of all their needs with its collective profits: communal meals, education and health care, for there are schools on the premises for the young, and Bruderhof physicians to care for most problems. What has to be done outside, such as tuition for advanced study² — say, of their doctors — is likewise paid for by the revenues of their factories. By the same token, the material needs of the Bruderhof are considerably lighter than the typical American, both because they share in most things — including the ownership of a few motor vehicles for going here and there — and because everything about their world radically denies the culture of consumerism. Thus the ecological load imposed by Bruderhof (per capita) is substantially less than that of the population at large, and if we could somehow figure out a way to get all the people of the industrialized nations to live so lightly on the earth, there would be no crisis of anywhere near the present scale to worry about.

If the Bruderhof are any example, we can affirm that neither industrialization nor technology can be the efficient causes of the ecological crisis. They are immersed in both and consume lightly, nor show any compulsion to grow. The reason is the social organization of labor, which under these communistic conditions causes the withering of capital’s rage to accumulate.

But these findings open up new questions. What are the conditions, both inner and outer, that enable so radical a shift to occur? What does this imply for markets in an ecologically sane society? And what does this say about socialism? Can we in fact get all the people to live this way? Should we?

As for the first question, there is no mystery. The Bruderhof are deeply Christian, which they interpret as Christian-Communist. The “holding all things in common” does not derive from Karl Marx, but from the Biblical record of the first Christians, Acts 2:44-45: “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” No matter that it has been perennially betrayed, the notion of

²All youths are required to live away for two years following graduation from high school, either at college or in supervised settings doing good works. Following this, the individual must decide him- or herself whether to return and re-enter the community as an adult. From what I have been told, about three-quarters decide to do so.

communism remains foundational for Christianity. It has a long and intricate history, within which Marx himself (who included in his best-known definition of communism, the phrase, “to each according to need”)³ belongs.³ The Bruderhof are simply being orthodox when they affirm communism. However, it needs to be added that they take this quite a distance. For they do not only practice Christian Communism, but preach it with a vengeance, and this makes them of special interest to us.

There is probably no more militant group on the left today than these descendants of the Radical Reformation. They have gone on pilgrimages against the death penalty, have sent their children in solidarity to blockaded Cuba and Iraq, and have become spiritual counselors to Mumia Abu-Jamal. The theme of these activisms is always to counter a persecution, as Jesus was persecuted, and as they themselves have been. That is the Christian Logos playing itself out in historical actuality, creating a new history to which their communism integrally belongs. Communism for the Bruderhof is not an economic or a political doctrine but one aspect of a universalizing spiritual force. The community does not tell others to be communists because they believe in its economic or even social superiority, but because being communist is part of the “good news” they wish to spread as Christians. It is an integral element of a spiritual totality. They do not want people to be communists for the sake of communism; they want them to be as Jesus, for which end communism is an essential practice.

We would say, then, that the Bruderhof have found a way to offset the capitalist market by inserting a spiritual moment into their worldly practice. Markets, the economists tell us, are powerful signalling systems, generating the prices that serve to tie together all economic agents. But this assumes that all agents are equivalently tuned to prices and monetary values and that they all obey the same logic and reason — or in terms of our discussion, that they are not Bruderhof. For when the market, into which all economic actors are inserted, issues the signal, “maximize profit and market share!” these economic actors do not hear the command, as they are marching to a different drum. Their practical faculties no longer resonate to the force field of capital. They simply do

³The phrase is from Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” in Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 531. The literature on this subject is vast. See John Cort, *Christian Socialism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). For Marx himself, see Hose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974).

not “value” their business that much. I have been told by Bruderhof that if it ever came down to a choice — if, for example, their political activity required that they all go to jail, or if the pursuit of their enterprise became too contradictory for whatever reason — then they would give up the business gladly. I am sure this is true. For Bruderhof, the meaning of productivity, and the labor arrangements necessary for this to be maximized, are only dimly lit points on the screen of a world-view where faith shines more brightly. The Bruderhof are an *intentional* community, and intentions, properly understood, can be material forces.

It must be that an important reason co-operatives, organic farms, et al., succumb to capital’s force field is the lack of an offsetting belief-system which enables them to renounce profitability. But this needs to be taken to another plane, if only to avoid the conclusion that our co-ops need to convert to radical Christianity in order to enter the promised land of ecosocialism. Such is clearly not the case, first, because an ecosocialist society must be fully democratic, and not the province of any religious interpretation; and more specifically, because the Bruderhof are not actually ecological in their orientation. They neither espouse particularly ecological concerns, nor is their practice compatible with ecocentrism, especially in the sphere of gender, where a highly patriarchal structure clashes fundamentally with the values of ecological transformation.⁴ Although the spiritual dimension of things is to play a very fundamental role in the process, ecosocialism cannot be religious, not the least because religion is a kind of binding of spirit that tends to foreclose the opening to ecological transformation.

But that is not the main point here, which is that the Bruderhof go further than the ordinary co-operative in resisting the force-field of the capitalist market because they are an “intentional” community. Therefore the generation of some kind of collective “intention” that can withstand the power of capital’s force field will be necessary for creating an

⁴Bruderhof are very strongly homophobic, for example, having gone out of their way to try to close gay bars in their vicinity, and refusing to join coalitions against the death penalty in which gay rights groups participate. Within the commune, though women have a definite voice, there is also distinct inequality, for example, in dress code, where the men can wear what they please while the women must wear traditional calico. Furthermore, divorce is forbidden. Moreover, the moral authority of the community devolves from the paternal voice of the Arnold family. There are signs that the generation coming up may see things differently; it will be interesting to follow this development. But in general, it seems to be harder for radical religions to give up patriarchal than class domination.

ecosocialist society; and it must be the “moral equivalent” of the Bruderhof’s all-encompassing belief. When the Bruderhof resisted the blandishments of the market, they were saying that the commodities they made meant something radically different from what bourgeois society would impose. Instead of the set of signals generated by the market, Bruderhof respond to a whole set of qualitative relations inserted into the meaning of the commodity. Further, these meanings were part of a reconfiguration of their *needs*. This is another way of stating what the *use-value* of the commodity became to them, for use-value is a universe of meanings pertaining to the satisfaction of needs and the wants that manifest needs. This applies not just to the commodities the Bruderhof make, but also to the productive relations in which they engage in order to make them — inasmuch as costs of production are themselves prices of commodities: the machines, the energy to run the machines, the inputs of materials, and most important, the labor expended in making their “goods.” For the Bruderhof, the entirety of their production is subsumed into a schema of use-value directed toward providing the means of going forth as Christ. That, in a word, is their “intention.”

Intentions are deployments of values, about which a brief amplification would be in order. Use-values stand at the juncture of a more original form of value and the kinds of value inherent to an economy. This original, or *intrinsic* value, may be thought of as the primary appropriation of the world for each person, in two senses: it is the way we first come to appreciate things and relationships in childhood; and it is, throughout life, the value given to reality irrespective of what we do to reality. It is the sense of the world conveyed in words like “wonder,” “awe,” or simply the quiet appreciation of the real without respect for what can be made out of it — including, of course, the making of money. Intrinsic values apply to the spiritual side of things, and also to what is playful, and are manifestations of an attitude we might call an “active receptivity” toward nature.

Use-values represent the form of value relevant to the application of labor to nature, or production, whether this be done for pure utility or as an exchangeable commodity. Use-values signify a more “transformatively active” relation to nature, the kind of transformation being different in the case of utility and exchange. Clearly, use-value is necessary for human life; and one might venture to say that a realized, ecologically integral life can be carried out through a rich interplay of use-value-as-utility with intrinsic value, in other words, through a combined receptive and transformative relation to nature.

Commodity production expands human capability but, by introducing the germ of exchange, also becomes that serpent in the edenic arrangement noted above.⁵ With this shift, nature shifts from being “for-itself” (which implies being for us insofar as we are part of nature) to a state of objectification within the framework of an economy. The matter does not stop here, but depends upon the way that economy and the society within which it is embedded deploys the different kinds of value. Since use-value now implies the presence of an exchange-value, it will be in a relationship with that exchange-value. Exchange-value, like use-value, entails a mental registration. Though it does not exist as such in nature, it exists in the mind of a natural creature, where, like any idea, it can have various valences and intensities. Thus some people are very attached to exchange-value, so that one could say that they “value exchange-value.” Indeed, exchange-value can have use-value — for what else is money but the usefulness of exchange? Use-values also stand between intrinsic values and exchange-value, and express varying degrees of estrangement from nature. Certain use-values are in a position of differentiation, wherein they are close to, and seek to restore intrinsic values; while others are alien, or as we say, split from intrinsic value, as in the use-value of money.⁶

Ecological politics can be translated into a framework of values. The Bruderhof care very little for exchange-value, opting instead for a radically Christian intrinsic value. The economy has its laws; but whether those laws are obeyed depends on the subjective balance within individuals, which in turn depends upon their social relations. This can be sketched as a kind of coefficient between the two kinds of economic value. If we call use-value, uv , and exchange-value, xv , then the coefficient, uv/xv , expresses in a rough sort of way the balance of forces disposing toward rejection or acceptance of the capitalist force field. I say, rough, not because these elements are indeterminate, but because they are qualitative and profoundly political. They exist not as something we can measure and put on a graph, but as collective

⁵Could this be the hidden meaning of the Fall? One should not be hasty, for a pre-economic life of pure utilization is not free of aggression or ambivalence, though it does lack expansive and cancerous implications.

⁶The notions of differentiation and splitting play an important role in the ontological foundations of this study. The former connotes a dialectical relationship of mutual recognition within an ecosystem; it is essential, therefore, for what may be called “ecological integrity.” The latter, fundamental for the regime of exchange-value, denies this and is at the heart of capital’s intrinsic ecodestructivity.

practices and sets of meanings, which have been struggled over and command in varying degrees the loyalties of people. When we say more, or less, with respect to use — and exchange — values, we mean it in the sense of “more fully realized.” From this angle, capitalism comprises that society which sees to it that $xv \gg uv$, so that people internalize the signals of the market and obey them as gospel; and furthermore, that the use-values of commodities are configured to the needs of exchange- and surplus-value, and not to those of nature’s intrinsic value, nor to that of a fulfilled human nature, whence we get sports utility vehicles, caffeinated soft drinks, roundup-ready soy beans, Huey helicopters, submission to globalization — and coordinatively, the loss of contact with nature and its reduction to mere matter and energy.

The usefulness of this kind of formulation derives from its potential to pry off the heavy stone laid over the possibilities of transforming capital, thereby opening the field to a wider and more differentiated range of action. Under normal capitalist conditions, exchange-value prevails and use-values are subordinated and degraded, both as they stand and as they are constantly multiplied to subserve endless, wasteful, and destructive commodities. Only consider, for example, the indifference with which people throw things out once they are “used:” the spectre of styrofoam cups (even at gatherings of ecologically active groups); the shelves of Toys ‘R Us groaning with plastic items awaiting their batteries and the swift transfer to the dump. Like the passage from the straight razor endlessly sharpened to the baggie full of throwaway razors, life itself has become disposable. My grandfather repaired watches, one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of his kind in New York City. Now his successors are as rare as snow leopards, and they work on items of conspicuous consumption while I wonder whether to throw away the Casio and buy another because the strap has broken. What is cost effective? This has become the “to be or not to be” question of capitalism; and in the search for surplus value it drives sensuously creative labor out of the market and replaces hand-craft with automated technical prowess.

In a liberated and ecologically sane world, use-values would take on a character independent of exchange-value, not to rule but to serve the needs of human nature and nature. They would, in other words, be shifted in the direction of intrinsic value. There is no necessary reason why this could not happen — although it cannot happen without a social transformation that expands democracy, allows the great range of human powers to be expressed and consolidated, and incorporates the great, countervailing intentions necessary to nullify capital’s force field.

Were there enough ecological militants about, organized according to coherent praxes that were not mere voluntarisms, but linked the one with another across a great international theatre of action, well then, the capitalist order could be surpassed. It would not stand one day if enough of the people said no!, in thunder, to it. Of course there is an enormous hedge here: if *enough* people decide, including soldiers and police, who are people, too.

Ecosocialism now reveals itself as a struggle for use-value — and through a realized use-value, for intrinsic value. This means it is a struggle for the qualitative side of things: not just the hours worked and the pay per hour and benefits, but the control over work and its product, and of what is beyond mere necessity — a control that eventuates in the creation and integration of new ecosystems, and also incorporates subjectivity, beauty, pleasure, and the spiritual. These demands were part of the labor tradition, as workers asked for not just bread but roses, too. We would take it to the limit of its implications: the ecosocialist demand is not just for the material things — bread — on one side, and the aesthetic things — roses — on the other. It regards both bread and roses from the same perspective of enhanced and realized use-values — or better yet, as *post-economic* intrinsic values: bread and the making of bread to become aspects of a singular ecosystemic process into which a universe of meaning is condensed — for what has more resonance than the “staff of life?” And roses are not external pretty things; they, too, have to be grown by labor. They, too, have a universe of meaning, closed to the eye dulled by exchange, a universe of terror and beauty to the eye opened:

Oh Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.⁷

⁷William Blake, “The Sick Rose,” from “Songs of Experience,” in Alicia Ostriker, ed., *The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1977).