

For an Ecosocialist Ethics

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Capital is a formidable reification machine. Since the Great Transformation about which Karl Polányi spoke, that is to say, since becoming autonomous, socially “dis-embedded”, the capitalist market economy functions according to its own impersonal laws of profit and accumulation. As Polányi underlined, it presupposes “no less than a transformation than that of the natural and human substance of society into commodities” thanks to a self-regulating market devices that inevitably lead to “disjoint man’s relationships and threaten his natural habitat with annihilation” (Polányi 1944, 42). It is a ruthless system that throws the underprivileged under the murderous wheels of progress.

In his great work, *Economy and Society*, Max Weber had already grasped the “thingfied” logic of capital:

The reification [*Versachlichung*] of the economy founded on the basis of the socialisation of the market follows absolutely its own objective legality [*sachlichen*] ... The reified universe [*versachliche Kosmos*] of capitalism leaves no place for any charitable orientation. (Weber 1923, 305)

From this Weber deduced that the capitalist economy is structurally incompatible with ethical principles.

By contrast with any form of domination, the economic domination of capital, due to its ‘impersonal character’, cannot be regulated by way of ethics ... Competition, the market, the job market, the money market, the market in foodstuffs, in brief, ‘objective’ considerations, neither ethical nor unethical, but simply non-ethical ... ultimately determine behaviour and introduce impersonal authorities between the human beings concerned. (ibid., 708-709)

In his neutral, aloof style, Weber put his finger on the essence of capital, its intrinsic “non-ethical” nature.

At the root of this incompatibility between capital and ethics one finds the phenomenon of quantification. Inspired by *Rechenhaftigkeit*—Weber’s calculation rationality—is a formidable calculation machine. It can only recognise the calculus of profits and losses, production figures, price measurements, and costs and benefits. It subjects the economy, society, and human life to the domination of commodity exchange-value and to its most abstract expression, money. These quantitative values, measured by 10, 100, 1000, or 1000000, know neither the just or unjust, neither the good nor the bad: they dissolve and destroy qualitative values, and first and foremost ethical values. Between the two forms of value there is “antipathy” in the ancient alchemical sense of the term: a failure of affinity between two substances.

Today, this complete—in fact, totalitarian—reign of market value, of quantitative value, of money, of capitalist finance, has reached an unprecedented degree in human history. However, by 1847, the system’s logic was already being understood through a lucid critique of capitalism:

Finally, there came a time when everything that men had considered as inalienable became an object of exchange, of traffic and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but

never sold; acquired, but never bought—virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc.—when everything, in short, passed into commerce. It is the time of general corruption, of universal venality, or, to speak in terms of political economy, the time when everything, moral or physical, having become a marketable value, is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value. (Marx 1937, 30)

The first reactions against capitalist commodification were not confined to workers, but included peasants and other popular classes. Such reactions were waged in the name of certain social values, certain social needs considered more legitimate than the political economy of capital. In studying these eighteenth century English mass movements, food riots, and revolts, historian E.P. Thompson speaks of a conflict between the “moral economy” of the masses and the capitalist economy of the market (which finds in Adam Smith its first grand theoretician). Food riots (where women played the main role) were a form of resistance to the market—in the name of the ancient “moral economy” of traditional communitarian norms—that were not without a rational basis and that in the long term probably saved the popular strata from starvation (Thompson 1991, 267-268).

Modern socialism is the inheritor of this kind of social protest, of this “moral economy.” It wishes to establish a form of production that no longer based on the criteria of market and capital—“solvent demand,” cost-effectiveness, profit, accumulation—but on the satisfaction of social needs, on “the commons,” and on social justices. It refers to qualitative values that cannot be reduced to market and monetary quantification. Rejecting productivism, Marx insisted on the priority of individuals’ being over having, possessing—the full realisation of their human potentialities. For him, the first and most imperative social need—and that which would open the gates to the “Realm of Freedom”—was free time, the reduction of work time, and individual self-fulfilment through play, study, civic activity, artistic creativity, love.

Among these social needs there is one that gains an increasingly decisive importance today, and that Marx had not taken sufficiently under consideration in his work (except by way of a few isolated passages): the need to protect the natural environment, the need for breathable air, potable water, food free of chemical toxins or nuclear radiation. It is a need that tends to be increasingly identified with the very survival of the human species on this planet, where ecological equilibria have been seriously threatened by the catastrophic consequences—global warming, ozone layer depletion, nuclear danger—of the infinite expansion of capitalist productivism.

Socialism and ecology therefore share some qualitative social values that cannot be reduced to the market. They also share in a revolt against “The Great Transformation”, against the reified detachment of the economy relative to society, and a desire to “re-embed” the economy in the social and natural environment (cf. Bensaïd 1995, 385-386, 396). But this convergence cannot be realised without Marxists’ critical analysis of their own traditional understanding of the “productive forces” (see below) and without ecologists’ break with the illusion of a fair “market economy.” This double operation is the task of a current, ecosocialism, which has succeeded in reconciling the two approaches.

What is, then, ecosocialism? It is a current of thought and environmentalist action that integrates the fundamental principles of Marxism, shorn of their productivist trappings. It is a current that understands capitalist market logic and profit—as much as techno-bureaucratic authoritarianism of the now defunct “popular democracies”—as incompatible with the protection of the environment. Lastly, it is a current that, while critical of dominant workers

movement ideology, knows that workers and their organisations are an essential force in any radical transformation of the system.

Ecosocialism has emerged mainly over the course of the last twenty-five years, with precursors in the studies of pioneering Russian scholars at the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries (Sergei Podolinsky, Vladimir Vernadsky). Its development can be traced to the works of thinkers such as Manuel Sacristán, Raymond Williams, André Gorz (in his early writings), as well as the important contributions of James O'Connor, Barry Commoner, Joan Martínez-Alier, Francisco Fernández Buey, Jean-Paul Déléage, Elmar Altvater, Frieder Otto Wolf, Joel Kovel, and many others. This current is far from homogeneous, but most of its representatives share core themes. One is a break with the productivist ideology of progress, whether in its capitalist or bureaucratic (so-called “real socialist”) forms. Another is in the opposition to the infinite expansion of a mode of production and consumption that is environmentally destructive. The ecosocialist current represents, among environmental movements, the most advanced tendency, the most sensitive relative to the interests of workers and the people of the Global South, those who have understood the impossibility of “sustainable development” within the framework of a capitalist market economy.

What could be the main elements of an ecosocialist ethics that radically opposes the destructive logic and fundamental “non-ethics” (Weber) of capitalist profitability and of the totalising market—this system of “universal venality” (Marx)? I will herein advance some hypotheses and some starting points for discussion. For my part, it is first and foremost a social ethics. This is not an ethics of individual behaviour. It is not a matter of making people feel guilty and promoting asceticism or self-limitation. It is certainly important that individuals be educated in the respect for the environment and the rejection of producing waste, but the actual stakes are elsewhere. It is about changing capitalist economic and social structures to establish a new production and distribution paradigm based, as discussed above, on the consideration of social needs, notably the vital need to live in a natural environment that is not degraded. It is a change that requires social actors, social movements, environmental organisations, political parties, and not just individuals of good will. This social ethics is a humanist ethics. Living in harmony with nature, protecting threatened species are as much human values as the destruction, through medicine, of forms of life that attack human life (microbes, viruses, parasites). The anopheles mosquito, carrier of the yellow fever, does not have the same “right to live” as Third World children threatened by that same illness. To save the latter it is ethically legitimate to eradicate the first, in some regions.

The ecological crisis, in threatening the natural equilibrium of the environment, is endangering not only flora and fauna, but also and foremost the health, living conditions, and the very survival of our species. There is therefore no need to start fighting against humanism or “anthropocentrism” to see the need for an ethical and political commitment in the defence of biodiversity or of animal species threatened by extinction. The fight to save the environment, which is necessarily a struggle to change civilisation, is a humanist imperative that concerns not only such and such social class, but the entirety of all individuals. This imperative concerns future generations threatened by prospects for an unliveable planet as a result of more and more uncontrollable damage to the environment. However, the notions of future peril on which ecological ethics have been founded have now been well surpassed. The question is now much more urgent and concerns present generations directly. Individuals living at the beginning of the twenty-first century already know the dramatic consequences of the capitalist destruction and poisoning of the biosphere and they risk having to face—as regards younger people, in any case—some veritable catastrophes within the next twenty to thirty years.

An ecosocialist ethics is also an egalitarian ethics. The present mode of production and consumption in the advanced capitalist countries, based on a logic of infinite accumulation (of capital, of profits, of commodities), of wasting resources, of ostentatious consumption, and of accelerated environmental destruction, cannot be extended at all to the rest of the world without worsening the ecological crisis. This system is therefore necessarily based on maintaining and aggravating striking disparities between North and South. The ecosocialist project aims to redistribute wealth across the world and the communal development of resources, thanks to a new production paradigm. The ethico-social requirement of satisfying social needs cannot make any sense except within a spirit of social justice, of equality—which is not the same as homogenisation—and of solidarity. It implies, in the last analysis, the collective appropriation of the means of production and the distribution of goods and services according to the maxim “to each according to their needs.” This has nothing in common with liberal claims of “equity,” where social inequalities are justified insofar as they are tied to social positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (Rawls 1995, 29-30), the classical argument of the defenders of economically and socially “free competition.”

Equally, ecosocialism implies a democratic ethics. As long as economic decisions and production choices are in the hands of a capitalist oligarchy, bankers and technocrats,—or in the formerly existing system of state-run economies, of a bureaucracy devoid of any democratic control—one will never come out of the infernal cycle of productivism, of workers exploitation, and of the destruction of the environment. Economic democracy, which implies the socialisation of the productive forces, means that big decisions over production and distribution are not taken by “the markets” or by a politburo, but by society itself, following democratic and pluralistic debate, where different proposals and options oppose each other. This is the necessary condition of introducing a different socio-economic logic and a different kind of relationship with nature.

Finally, ecosocialism is a radical ethics in the etymological sense. It is an ethics that proposes to go to the roots of a problem. Half-measures, reforms, the Rio Conferences, the markets in the right to pollute are incapable of bringing any solution. There must be a radical change of paradigm, a new model of civilisation, in brief, a revolutionary transformation. This revolution addresses not only social relations of production—private property, the division of labour—but also the forces of production. The structure of the production process itself must be questioned, in contrast to the notions of certain vulgar Marxism—which can support itself by reference to some foundational texts—where change is solely understood in terms of suppression—in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*—of capitalist social relations and of the obstacles to the free development of the productive forces. To paraphrase Marx’s famous formulation on the State, after the Paris Commune: workers, people, cannot take over the production apparatus and simply make it work for their benefit; they must break it and replace it with another. This means a profound transformation of the technical structure of production and the sources of energy—fossil fuel or nuclear—that shape it. A technology respectful of the environment and renewable energy—notably solar—is at the heart of the ecosocialist project (on the political significance of choosing between fossil fuels and solar energy, see Isselin 2001).

The utopia of an ecological socialism, of a “solar communism” (Schwartzman 1996), means one should fight henceforth for the realisation of immediate objectives that prefigure the future and that are inspired by the same values:

Privileging public transport against the monstrous proliferation of individual vehicles and roadways

- Escaping the nuclear trap and developing the search for renewable energy sources
- Requiring the respect for agreements over reducing greenhouse gas emissions and rejecting the mystification of a “market for the right to pollute”

- Struggling for organic farming and fighting transnational agribusinesses and their GMOs

These are but a few examples and one could easily make many others. One finds such demands and similar other ones among the claims made by the international movement against capitalist globalisation and neoliberalism. This global movement has emerged in 1996 through the “intergalactic” conference, organised by the Zapatistas in the mountains of Chiapas, against neoliberalism and for humanity. It has revealed its strength in the 1999 Seattle demonstrations, in Prague, in Québec, in Nice (2000), and in Genoa (2001), among many other places. It is a movement that is not only critical of the monstrous social injustices created by the system, but also capable of offering concrete alternatives, such as the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre (January 2001). The revolt and proposals of this movement, which rejects the commodification of the world, draw their moral inspiration from an ethics of solidarity, traceable to social and environmental values close to those herein described.

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