

Socialism and ecology

In America, and to a certain extent in Britain, the movement of those concerned about the environment has become infested by people who want to turn ecology from a naturalistic science into a religion with a “spiritual” message. Where they are not supporters of conventional religion, they want us to believe that nature is peopled by wood sprites and other spirits headed by a goddess—Mother Earth, or Gaia—who we should worship under the auspices of witches and priestesses, or some such manifest nonsense. On a more philosophical level this takes the form of a doctrine called “deep ecology” according to which human beings and flies are of equal significance and which sees the human species in itself as a disturbing feature to the biosphere which, until we mend our ways, nature is quite justified in taking steps to eliminate (through famines and ecological disasters).

Murray Bookchin is one of those in the ecological movement who are fighting against this resurgence of anti-rationalism and anti-humanism which he calls the “counter-Enlightenment” (it extends beyond the Green movement, of course, as in the growth of astrology, belief in UFOs and the like). He points out in his latest book *Remaking Society* (Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1989) that human beings are both a part and a product of nature; that, despite what the “deep ecologists” say about flies, humans do have a unique significance in nature since they are the only life-form capable of reflective thought and so of conscious intervention to change the environment. It is absurd to regard human intervention in nature as some outside disturbing force, since humans are precisely that part of nature which has evolved that consciously intervenes in the rest of nature; it is our nature to do so. It is quite true that at the present time the *form* human intervention in (the rest of) nature takes is upsetting natural balances and cycles, but the point is that humans, unlike other life-forms, are capable of changing their behaviour.

If humans have a “place” in nature, says Bookchin, it can only be to consciously intervene not just to meet their needs but also to ensure nature’s balanced functioning; in this sense the human species is the brain and voice of nature, nature become self-conscious. But to fulfil this role humans must change the social system which mediates their intervention in nature. Bookchin is explicit enough on what this change must be: a change from capitalism, in both its corporate enterprise form in the West and its bureaucratic form in the East, to a “community where each contributes to the whole to the best of his or her ability and takes from the common fund of produce what he or she needs”:

“The earth can no longer be owned; it must be shared. Its fruits, including those produced by technology and labour, can no longer be expropriated by the few; they must be rendered available to all on the basis of need. Power, no less than material things, must be freed from the control of the elites; it must be redistributed in a form that renders its use participatory.”

This, of course, is instantly recognisable to us as the world society of common ownership, democratic control and production geared to meeting needs that we call “world socialism”. Bookchin himself does not use this term, preferring to speak of this as being

the application of what he calls “social ecology”. He is in fact an anarchist in the anarcho-communist tradition of Kropotkin, and in other of his works has accepted the term “communism” to describe the alternative to capitalism. But what is important is the content, not the label, and it is heartening to know that, whatever our disagreements about how to get from here to there, there is a group of people in the Green movement in America putting forward the same solution as us.

Indeed, some of the things Bookchin says mirror the criticism we have made of the Green Party in this country:

“To substitute words like industrial society for capitalism can thus be misleading . . . To speak of an ‘industrial society’ without clear reference to the new social relations introduced by capitalism, namely wage labour and a dispossessed proletariat, often wilfully endows technology with mystical powers and a degree of autonomy that it does not really have. It also creates the highly misleading notion that society can live with a market economy that is ‘green’, ‘ecological’, or ‘moral’, even under conditions of wage labour, exchange, competition and the like. This misuse of language imputes to technology—much of which may be very useful socially and ecologically—what should really be directed against a very distinct body of social relationships, namely, capitalistic ones.”

Disagreement with Marx

Such disagreements as exist between Bookchin and us arise from the fact that we are in the Marxist whereas he is in the anarchist tradition. In this book Bookchin takes up an explicitly anti-Marx stand, arguing against the materialist conception of history on the grounds that Marx was wrong to say that a free society only became possible with the development of the productive forces under capitalism; on the contrary, says Bookchin, a democratic society of common ownership could have been established at a number of key turning points in history. Since we are now where we are, and both sides are agreed that the solution to world problems lies in the immediate establishment of a society of common ownership, democratic participation and production for needs, this can be seen as a rather academic dispute. After all, whether or not a communistic society could have been established at the end of the feudal era (but wasn't) had sufficient humans opted for this does not affect what we should do now.

This brings us to Bookchin's other disagreement with Marx, in fact not just with Marx but also with those in the anarchist tradition such as the anarcho-syndicalists who continue to look to the class struggle of the workers as the driving force for the establishment of a society of common ownership. “The working class”, writes Bookchin, “has become a largely devitalized force for basic social change, not to mention revolution”. Here, Bookchin is using the term *working class* in the limited sense of factory workers and it is true that there is nothing special about factory workers compared with other workers (office workers, service workers) that means that it is the pursuit of their particular interests as factory workers that will be the driving force for the establishment of common ownership. If common ownership is a working class issue, it is an issue for the working class as a whole: *all* those who are dependent for a living on selling their mental and physical energies for a wage or salary, irrespective of whether

they work in a factory or an office or a school or a shop or whatever.

This is the sense in which we use the term and we still think it makes sense to see the struggle for common ownership as a class struggle. To say that productive resources should not be subject to private property rights is to say that they should be taken away from those who currently hold them as their exclusive property. The struggle to establish common ownership is thus a struggle by the rest of society (in effect, the working class in its proper, broad sense) against the monopolising minority (the capitalist class). This is not to say that, in this struggle, those we in the Socialist Party call the working class are merely pursuing their own narrowly economic interests; at the same time they are pursuing the general interest of the whole of humanity.

Limits to Capitalism

At one time it was widely believed amongst social revolutionaries that the change-over to common ownership would be sparked off by some economic crisis that would push workers to overthrow capitalism just in order to get their basic material needs satisfied. Some in the Marxist tradition (though not us) even believed that capitalism would eventually break down economically, leaving workers no choice but to establish common ownership.

Experience has shown these beliefs to have been misplaced. So what will spark off the change-over? Bookchin suggests that the limits to capitalism are “external” rather than “internal”:

“For generations, radical theorists opined about the ‘inner limits’ of the capitalist system, the ‘internal’ mechanisms within its operation as an economy that would yield its self-destruction... In the face of vast biogeochemical dislocations that have opened vast holes in the earth’s ozone layer and increased the temperature of the planet by the ‘greenhouse effect’, these limits are now clearly ecological. Whatever may be the destiny of capitalism as a system that has ‘internal limits’ economically, we can emphatically say that it has *external* limits ecologically.”

This (rather than stale arguments about the materialist conception of history) is the sort of thing that those who want a world of common ownership and democratic participation should be discussing. We ourselves have long reached the conclusion that capitalism has no “internal” limits (our classic pamphlet *Why Capitalism Will Not Collapse* appeared in 1932): unfortunately, from a purely economic view, capitalism could continue indefinitely. Such limits as it might have as an economic and social system have therefore to be “external”.

Bookchin’s hypothesis that these limits are ecological is attractive (we have in fact discussed it amongst ourselves), but there are other candidates, in particular the nature of human beings as rational and socially co-operative animals. (Can capitalism reduce us indefinitely to isolated competing atoms when it is our nature as a species to co-operate to survive? Can capitalism indefinitely prevent us as life-forms capable of reflective thought from seeing that, as a matter of objective fact, common ownership and democratic control is the only framework within which contemporary problems can be

solved?).

Whether we disagree with Bookchin's hypothesis here or not, it is clear that he is on the same wavelength as us. This is not a discussion between supporters and opponents of socialism but a discussion amongst people who are agreed that the way forward for humanity lies in the establishment of a world of common ownership, democratic participation and production to meet needs.

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