

A vision of Green Socialism

Eco-socialism. From Deep Ecology to Social Justice. By David Pepper. Routledge. £10.99 (paperback).

David Pepper's theme is that Greens, as those concerned about the environment, have more to learn from Marxian socialism (including ourselves who he sees as "orthodox" exponents of this) than from the deep ecology and anarchism which currently influence them.

The Deep Ecologists are those who argue that the interests of the rest of nature are more important than the interests of the human species. They are the people who argue that the life of a fly is as important as the life of a human and who see humans as a pollutant and our increase in numbers as a plague on the rest of nature. According to them, the only stable future for humans lies in our submission to the laws of Nature which some of them see as the dictates of the goddess Gaia.

Merciless

Pepper is merciless in his criticism of such mysticism and such anti-humanism and re-asserts the Renaissance and Enlightenment project of seeking the best possible life for all human beings. Socialists, he says, start from a concern for the suffering of humans and look for a solution to this. This makes them "anthropocentric" (as opposed to the "ecocentrism" – Nature first – of the Deep Ecologists). Pepper makes no apology for this. Yes, he says, Socialists are concerned with humans first. This does not mean of course that the plunder and destruction of the rest of nature is therefore justifiable; it simply means that this is rejected as not being in the interests of the human species, not because the interests of Nature come first.

Nor, says Pepper, is it true that humans as such are a pollutant. It is here – in identifying the causes of pollution and environmental degradation – that Greens can in his view learn most from Marx. Marx's materialist conception of history makes the way humans are organised to meet their material needs the basis of any society. Humans meet their material needs by transforming parts of the rest of nature into things that are useful to them; this in fact is what production is. So the basis of any society is its mode of production which, again, is the same thing as its relationship to the rest of nature. Humans survive by interfering in the rest of nature to change it for their own benefit.

But Deep Ecologists and other Greens are wrong to see this interference as inherently destructive of nature; it might do this but there is no reason why it has to. That humans have to interfere in nature is a fact of human existence. How humans interfere in nature, on the other hand, depends on the kind of society they live in. Present-day society, capitalism, which exists all over the globe (and Pepper is quite clear that what existed in Russia and its satellites was a form of capitalism), is a class-divided society where the means of production are owned and controlled by a tiny minority of the population only.

Demands of capitalism

Capitalism differs from previous class societies in that under it production is not for direct use, not even of the ruling class, but for sale on a market. Competitive pressures to minimise costs and maximise sales, profit-seeking and blind economic growth, with all their destructive effects on the rest of nature, are built-in to capitalism. These, says Pepper, “make capitalism inherently ‘environmentally unfriendly’”:

“Increasing rather than steady profits are needed in order to increase capital accumulation, to reinvest in the hope of creating yet more capital. By definition this is what the system is about . . . Resource conservation, recycling and pollution control are discouraged in the free market by the drive to increase productivity and maximise surplus value. Obviously, such practices involve more costs, and it is good practice for firms to internalise returns but externalise costs – that is, to let society as a whole pay them . . . Externalisation of costs can be seen in atmospheric, water and land pollution, in preferring road to rail transport, in throwaway products and packaging, and indeed in the “rationalisation” of production via machinery - the social costs of resultant unemployment being charged to society as a whole” (pp 92-3).

Pepper concludes that “the ecological contradictions of capitalism make sustainable, or ‘green’ capitalism an impossible dream, therefore a confidence trick”. Most Greens, though they might not express it precisely in this way, are in favour of some form of capitalism, generally smallscale capitalism involving small firms serving local markets. This, says Pepper, reflects their underlying philosophy that “small is beautiful”, a philosophy that leads them to mistakenly blame largescale industry and modern technology as such for causing pollution.

Blaming the messenger

Greens have, says Pepper, a predilection for blaming “soul-destroying, life-destroying industrialism” or “the industrial paradigm” (Porritt, *Seeing Green*) for the “crisis”, but not specifying its form.

“Does the fault lie in all industrial production, or could we, by adopting proper socialist arrangements, produce, transform nature, reap benefits from science and technology and have growth in needs satisfaction and in life quality: all without bringing on ecological crisis? Socialists unequivocally say ‘yes’: greens are frequently equivocal, vague or just confused” (p. 144).

Pepper attributes the typical Green view that “small is beautiful” to the influence of anarchism. By opposing centralism as inherently “authoritarian”, argues Pepper, anarchists have encouraged the mistaken attitude that anything Big is necessarily Bad. But small is not necessarily beautiful – all previous class societies to capitalism were based on smallscale production and none of them were at all beautiful.

What all those calling themselves anarchists have in common is opposition to the “state”. This, rather than class society or capitalism, is seen as the main cause of human suffering now and in the past. Indeed, the state is seen as the creator of class society and of capitalism. Anarchists tend to see the state not just as the public power of coercion, as

embodied in armed bodies of men, prisons and courts of law, but as any central administrative body. This makes them opponents of any central administration even one without coercive powers. This is the main criticism Pepper has of them since it leads them to favour the in his view unrealistic project of trying to organise society on a completely decentralized basis. Pepper points out that many of today's environmental problems are world problems – acid rain, global warming, hole in the ozone layer, tropical deforestation, not to mention world poverty, lack of education and disease – that can only be tackled on a world scale, and he is sceptical of this being able to be undertaken effectively by loose adhoc federations of local communities:

“To achieve a globally coordinated egalitarian production and distribution of goods and resources, with utmost ecological care, peace and social justice – to do this anarchistically on the basis of loose, spontaneous, direct democracy (even majority, let alone consensual) among millions of substantially autonomous communes, coops, city regions and bioregions – this stretches credibility” (p. 227).

This leads Pepper to talk in terms of “the need for a state” and to comment that “paradoxically” for orthodox Marxists we in the Socialist Party stand for the abolition of the state. We do indeed stand for the abolition of “the state”, but not in the anarchist sense which sees the state as any permanent central administration. Our objection is not the existence of some permanent administrative body beyond local level but to this body having armed force and prisons at its disposal. It is possessing such powers that makes it a state and it is these coercive powers that we want to abolish, leaving the central body with purely administrative functions. At the same time, of course, it will have to be thoroughly democratised.

No paradox

Seen this way, Pepper's paradox disappears. Apart from the language used, we are both envisaging the same thing: the continuation of some permanent administrative structure beyond local level. He calls this “some kind of state or state-like institution” and “an enabling ‘state’ or similar institution”. We have an aversion to talking about a “socialist state” – but none at all to talking about a socialist central administrative body. Having said this, neither we (nor Pepper) rule out a fairly high degree of decentralisation and local control; it is just that we recognize the need also for permanent administrative bodies at regional and global as well as local level.

Pepper's book is in fact a pioneering work in that for the first time in a book of this sort our views are discussed on equal terms and in detail with others who have something to say about capitalism, socialism and ecology. Pepper quotes extensively from our pamphlets and in particular from the tapes of our talks and debates (which he recommends in his Foreword “to readers who want to find out more about socialism from socialists rather than just from more detached and less exciting academic textbooks”). Pepper's “ecosocialism” is very similar to what we mean by socialism (or communism). He too sees the framework within which humans can regulate their relationship with the rest of nature in an ecologically acceptable way as being a society based on the common ownership and democratic control of productive resources, freed from the tyranny of the

economic laws that operate wherever there is production for sale on a market.

In such a society production and distribution can be geared to satisfying human needs which, contrary to the mythology used to justify capitalism, are not limitless and can be met without over-stretching nature's resources. In fact satisfactions can be increased – which after all must be the aim of socialism – without doing this:

“An ecological-communist utopia requires the development of productive forces. To say this is not to accept the fatuous market liberal argument that economic growth (of any kind) is needed to ‘create’ the wealth required to be able to afford to clean up the environment (i.e. to clean up the mess created by the growth in the first place). Eco-socialist growth must be a rational, planned development for everyone's equal benefit, which would therefore be ecologically benign: ‘A society based on common ownership and democratic control, with production solely for use and not sale and profit, alone provides the framework within which humans can meet their needs in ecologically acceptable ways’ (SPGB, *Ecology and Socialism*, 1990)”.

Pepper continues:

Such socialist development can be green, being predicated on the maxim that there are natural limits to every human's material needs. They are needs which can therefore be met within the broad limits of nature's ability to contribute to productive forces. The fact that in socialist development people continuously develop their needs to more sophisticated levels does not have to infringe this maxim. A society richer in the arts, where people eat more varied and cleverly prepared food, use more artfully constructed technology, are more educated, have more varied leisure pursuits, travel more, have more fulfilling relationships and so on, would likely demand less, rather than more, of earth's carrying capacity, as any green will tell you” (pp 219-20).

How to get there

The big question that remains is how to get from here to there. Pepper writes on this:

“Trying to smash capitalism violently will probably not work while capitalists control the state, so the state must be taken and liberated in some way for the service of all. There are limits to achieving this by attempting a revolution in mass consciousness via education and exemplary lifestyle. Neither can involvement in managing capitalism produce fundamental solutions to environmental crises. Nor will a dictatorship of the proletariat, initiated by a vanguard which then becomes the dictator, be acceptable. An ecologically sound socialist society will not come until most people want it enough to be prepared to create and maintain it. Probably, and regrettably, the biggest catalyst will be the failure of capitalism (a) to produce ‘the goods’ which it promises, for even a small minority (b) to create a physical and non-material environment for the rest which is tolerable enough to contain discontent. But the development and extension, now, of an oppositional eco-socialist line of ideas and actions will help the change and will help to reduce the future casualties of

capitalist regimes” (pp 234-5).

We can go along with most of this, though what distinguishes us is that we hold that, whatever trade unions and residents groups might usefully do to mitigate some environmental degradation under capitalism, the role of a socialist organisation is not to itself propose, advocate or campaign for reforms of capitalism but to concentrate exclusively on advocating socialism as the only lasting solution to this and other problems.

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