Ecosocialism: Putting on the Brakes Before Going Over the Cliff

written by Michael Löwy | February 2, 2014

Ecosocialism is an attempt to provide a radical, civilizational alternative to capitalism, rooted in the basic arguments of the ecological movement, and in the Marxist critique of political economy. It opposes to capitalism's *destructive progress* (Marx) an economic policy founded on non-monetary and extra-economic criteria: social needs and ecological equilibrium. This dialectical synthesis, attempted by a broad spectrum of authors, from James O'Connor to Joel Kovel and John Bellamy Foster, and from André Gorz (in his early writings) to Elmar Altvater, is at the same time a critique of "market ecology," which does not challenge the capitalist system, as well as of "productivist socialism," which ignores the issue of natural limits.

Marx and Engels themselves were not unaware of the environmental-destructive consequences of the capitalist mode of production: there are several passages in *Capital* and other writings that point to this understanding.[1] Moreover, they believed that the aim of socialism was not to produce more and more commodities, but to give human beings free time to fully develop their potentialities. They have little in common with "productivism," i.e. with the idea that the unlimited expansion of production is an aim in itself.

However, there are some passages in their writings which seem to suggest that socialism will permit the development of productive forces beyond the limits imposed on them by the capitalist system. According to this approach, the socialist transformation concerns only the capitalist relations of production, which have become an obstacle—"chains" is the term often used—to the free development of the existing productive forces; socialism would mean above all the *social appropriation* of these productive capacities, putting them at the service of the workers. To quote a passage from *Anti-Dühring*, a canonical work for many generations of Marxists, under socialism "society takes possession openly and without detours of the productive forces that have become too large" for the existing system.[2]

The experience of the Soviet Union illustrates the problems that result from a collectivist appropriation of the capitalist productive apparatus: from the beginning, the thesis of the socialization of the existing productive forces predominated. It is true that during the first years after the October Revolution an ecological current was able to develop, and certain (limited) measures to protect the environment were taken by the Soviet authorities. However, with the process of Stalinist bureaucratization, the productivist tendencies, both in industry and agriculture, were imposed with totalitarian methods, while the ecologists were marginalized or eliminated. The catastrophe of Chernobyl is an extreme example of the disastrous consequences of this imitation of Western productive technologies. A change in the forms of property that is not accompanied by democratic management and a reorganization of the productive system can only lead to a dead end.

Marxists can take their inspiration from Marx' remarks on the Paris Commune: workers cannot take possession of the capitalist state apparatus and put it to function at their service. They have to "break it" and replace it by a radically different, democratic, and non-statist form of political power.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the productive apparatus; by its nature, its structure, it is not neutral, but at the service of capital accumulation and the unlimited expansion of the market. It is in

contradiction with the need to protect the environment and the health of the population. One must therefore "revolutionize" it through a process of radical transformation. This may mean, for certain branches of production, to discontinue them altogether: for instance, nuclear plants, certain methods of industrial fishing (already responsible for the extermination of several species in the seas), the destructive logging of tropical forests, and so on—the list is very long! In any case the productive forces, and not only the relations of production, have to be deeply changed to begin with, by a revolution in the energy system, with the replacement of the present sources—essentially fossil fuels—responsible for the pollution and poisoning of the environment, by renewable ones: water, wind, and sun. Of course, many scientific and technological achievements of modernity are precious, but the whole productive system must be transformed, and this can be done only by ecosocialist methods, i.e. through a democratic planning of the economy that takes into account the preservation of the ecological equilibrium.

Society itself, and not a small oligarchy of property-owners—nor an elite of techno-bureaucrats—will be able to choose, democratically, which productive lines are to be privileged, and how much of the natural and social resources are to be invested in education, health, or culture. The prices of goods themselves would not be left to the "laws of supply and demand" but, to some extent, determined according to social and political options, as well as ecological criteria, leading to taxes on certain products and subsidized prices for others. Ideally, as the transition to socialism moves forward, more and more products and services would be distributed free of charge, according to the will of the citizens. Far from being by nature "despotic," planning is the exercise by a whole society of its freedom: the freedom to make decisions. Democratic planning also means liberation from the alienated and reified "economic laws" of the capitalist system that determined the individuals' lives and deaths and enclosed them in an economic "iron cage" (Max Weber). Planning and the reduction of labor time are the two decisive steps of humanity towards what Marx called "the kingdom of freedom." A significant increase in free time is in fact a condition for the democratic participation of working people in democratic discussion and management of the economy and of society.

While under capitalism use-value is only a means—often a trick—at the service of exchange-value and profit—which explains, by the way, why so many products in the present society are substantially useless—in a planned socialist economy the use-value is the only criterion for the production of goods and services, with far reaching economic, social, and ecological consequences. As Joel Kovel observed, "The enhancement of use-values and the corresponding restructuring of needs becomes now the social regulator of technology rather than, as under capital, the conversion of time into surplus value and money."[3] Ecosocialist planning is based on the principle of a democratic and pluralist debate on all the levels where decisions are to be taken: different propositions are submitted to the concerned people by parties, platforms, or any other political movement, and delegates elected accordingly. Representative democracy, however, must be completed—and corrected—by direct democracy where people directly choose—at the local, national and, later, global level—between major social and ecological options.

What guarantee is there that the people will make the correct ecological choices, even at the price of giving up some of their habits of consumption? There is no such "guarantee," other than the wager on the rationality of democratic decisions, once the power of commodity fetishism is broken. Of course, with popular choices, errors will be committed, but who believes that the experts themselves do not make errors? One cannot imagine the establishment of such a new society without the majority of the population having achieved—through their struggles, their self-education, and their social experience—a high level of socialist and ecological consciousness, and this makes it reasonable to suppose that errors—including decisions that are inconsistent with environmental needs—will be corrected. In any case, are not the proposed alternatives—the blind market or an ecological dictatorship of "experts"—much more dangerous than the democratic process with all its

contradictions?

The passage from capitalist "destructive progress" to ecosocialism is an historical process, a permanent revolutionary transformation of society, culture, and mentalities. This transition would lead not only to a new mode of production and an egalitarian and democratic society, but also to an alternative *mode of life*, a new ecosocialist *civilization*, beyond the reign of money, beyond consumption habits artificially produced by advertising, and beyond the unlimited production of commodities that are useless or harmful to the environment. It is important to emphasize that such a process cannot begin without a revolutionary transformation of social and political structures, and the active support by the vast majority of the population of an ecosocialist program. The development of socialist consciousness and ecological awareness is a process where the decisive factor is peoples' own collective experience of struggle, from local and partial confrontations to the radical change of society as a whole.

This does not mean that conflicts will not arise, particularly during the transitional process, between the requirements of protecting the environment and social needs, between the ecological imperatives and the necessity of developing basic infra-structures, particularly in the poor countries, between popular consumer habits and the scarcity of resources. A classless society is not a society without contradictions and conflicts! These are inevitable: it will be the task of democratic planning in an ecosocialist perspective, liberated from the imperatives of capital and profit-making, to solve them, through a pluralist and open discussion, leading to decision-making by society itself. Such a grassroots and participative democracy is the only way, not to avoid errors, but to permit the self-correction by the social collectivity of its own mistakes. Is this Utopia? In its etymological sense—"something that exists nowhere"—certainly. But are not utopias, i.e. visions of an alternative future, wish-images of a different society, a necessary feature of any movement that wants to challenge the established order? As Daniel Singer explained in his literary and political testament, *Whose Millenium?*, in a powerful chapter entitled "Realistic Utopia,"

If the establishment now looks so solid, despite the circumstances, and if the labor movement or the broader left are so crippled, so paralyzed, it is because of the failure to offer a radical alternative. (…) The basic principle of the game is that you question neither the fundamentals of the argument nor the foundations of society. Only a global alternative, breaking with these rules of resignation and surrender, can give the movement of emancipation genuine scope.[4]

The socialist and ecological utopia is only an objective possibility, not the inevitable result of the contradictions of capitalism or of the "iron laws of history." One cannot predict the future, except in conditional terms: in the absence of an ecosocialist transformation, of a radical change in the civilizational paradigm, the logic of capitalism will lead the planet to dramatic ecological disasters, threatening the health and the life of billions of human beings, and perhaps even the survival of our species.

To dream, and to struggle, for a new civilization does not mean that one does not fight for concrete and urgent reforms. Without any illusions in a "clean capitalism," one must try to win time and to impose on the powers-that-be some elementary changes: the banning of the HCFCs (hydrochlorofluorocarbons) that are destroying the ozone layer, a general moratorium on genetically modified organisms, a drastic reduction in the emission of the greenhouse gases, the development of public transportation, the taxation of polluting cars, the progressive replacement of trucks by trains, a severe regulation of the fishing industry, as well as of the use of pesticides and chemicals in the agro-industrial production. These urgent eco-social demands can lead to a process of radicalization on the condition that one does not accept to limit one's aims according to the requirements of "the

[capitalist] market" or of "competition." According to the logic of what Marxists call "a transitional program," each small victory, each partial advance can immediately lead to a higher demand, to a more radical aim. These, and similar issues, are at the heart of the agenda of the Global Justice movement and the World Social Forums that have permitted the convergence of social and environmental movements in a common struggle against the system. The another-world-is-possible movement is without a doubt the most important phenomenon of anti-systemic resistance of the beginning of the twenty-first century. One could say that this movement was born with the "Battle of Seattle" that took place at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999. The most striking aspect of this movement was the surprising convergence between turtles and Teamsters, that is, ecologists dressed as turtles and the truck drivers and dock workers of the trucking industry. The ecological issue was present then at the beginning and at the center of the mobilizations against neo-liberal capitalist globalization. The movement's slogan was "the world is not a commodity," meaning, obviously, that the air, the water, the earth, in a word, the natural environment which has increasingly been subject to capital's stranglehold. One can say that the another-world-is-possible movement is made up of three elements: 1) a radical protest against the existing order of things and its sinister institutions: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the G-8 group; 2) a number of concrete measures, of proposals that could be immediately implemented: a tax on finance capital, the suppression of the debt of the developing countries, an end to imperialist wars; 3) the utopia of "another possible world" founded on common values such as freedom, participatory democracy, social justice, the defense of the environment.

The ecological dimension is present in each of these three moments: it inspires both the revolt against a system that has led humanity to a tragic impasse and a collection of specific proposals—monitoring of genetically modified organisms, development of collective transportation—together with the utopia of a society living in harmony with the ecosystems, as sketched out in the documents of the movement.

This doesn't mean that there are not contradictions resulting from the resistance of some sections of the labor union movement to ecological demands that are perceived as a threat to jobs as well as the limited nature and lack of social awareness of some ecological organizations. But one of the most positive features of the Social Forums, and of the another-world-is-possible movement as a whole, is the possibility of meetings, debate, dialogue, and of mutual education among the movements.

It is important to emphasize that the presence of ecology in the broader movements is not limited to ecological organizations—Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, among others. It becomes more and more a dimension to be taken into account—in action and reflection—in the different social movements of peasants, of the indigenous, of feminists, and of the religious (the Theology of Liberation).

A striking example of this "organic" integration of ecological questions by other social movements is the Movement of the Landless (MST) in Brazil, part of the Via Campesina network, both of which have been pillars of the World Social Movement and the another-world-is-possible movement. Since it was founded the MST has been hostile to capitalism and to its rural expression, agro-business; it has increasingly integrated an ecological dimension into its fight for a radical agrarian reform and for another model of agriculture. Since the twentieth anniversary celebration of the movement in Río de Janeiro (2005) the document of the organizers stated: our dream is "an egalitarian world that socializes the material and cultural wealth," a new path for society "founded on equality between human beings and ecological principles." This translates into action by the MST against the GMOs—action often on the margins of legality—which is at the same time a fight against the attempt of the multinationals such as Monsanto and Syngenta to completely control seeds and thus dominate farmers and peasants, as well as a struggle against the pollution and uncontrollable contamination of their fields.

So, thanks to a “savage” occupation, in 2006 the MST won the expropriation of a transgenic corn and soy field grown from Syngenta Seeds in the State of Paraná which has since become the peasant camp “Free Land.” We should also mention their confrontations with multinational paper pulp mills that have multiplied, affecting hundreds of thousands of acres turning them into veritable “green deserts” comprised of forests of eucalyptus trees that suck up all sources of water and destroy biodiversity. For the MST leaders and activists, these various fights are inseparable from a radical, anti-capitalist perspective.

Peasant and indigenous movements of Latin America are at the center of the struggle for the environment. This is true not only through their local actions in defense of rivers or forests against petroleum and mining multinationals, but also in that they propose an alternative way of life to that of neo-liberal globalized capitalism. Indigenous peoples in particular may be the ones undertaking these struggles, but they quite often do so in alliance with landless peasants, ecologists, socialists, and Christian base communities, with support from unions, left parties, the Pastoral Land Commission, and the Indigenous Pastoral Ministry. The dynamics of capital require the transformation of all commonly held goods into commodities, which sooner or later leads to destruction of the environment. The petroleum zones of Latin America, abandoned by the multinationals after years of exploitation, are poisoned and destroyed, leaving behind a dismal legacy of illness among the inhabitants. It is thus completely understandable that the populations that live in the most direct contact with the environment are the first victims of this ecocide and attempt to oppose the destructive expansion of capital, sometimes successfully.

Resistance by indigenous peoples, then, has very concrete and immediate motivations—to save their forests or water resources—in their battle for survival. However, it also corresponds to a deep antagonism between the culture, the way of life, the spirituality and the values of these communities, and the “spirit of capitalism” as Max Weber defined it: the subjection of all activity to profit calculations, profitability as sole criterion and the quantification and reification, the *Versachlichung*, of all social relations. There is a sort of “negative affinity” between indigenous ethics and the spirit of capitalism—the converse of the elective affinity between the Protestant ethic and capitalism—, that is, a profound socio-cultural opposition. Certainly, there are indigenous or *metis* communities that adapt to the system and try to gain from it. Further, indigenous struggles involve extremely complex processes, including identity recomposition, transcoding of discourses, and political instrumentalizations, all of which deserve to be closely studied. Yet we can clearly see that a continuous series of conflicts characterizes the relations between indigenous populations and modern capitalist agricultural or mining corporations. This conflict has a long history. It is admirably described in one of the Mexican novels of the anarchist writer B. Traven, *The White Rose* (1929) which narrates how a large North American oil company seized the lands of an indigenous community after having murdered its leader.[5] The conflict, however, has intensified during the last few decades because of both the intensity and extensiveness of capital’s exploitation of the environment, and also because of the rise of the another-world-is-possible movement—which took on this struggle—and the indigenous movements of the continent.

Such struggles around concrete issues are important, not only because partial victories are welcome in themselves, but also because they contribute to raising ecological and socialist consciousness, and because they promote activity and self-organization from below: both are decisive and necessary pre-conditions for a radical, i.e. revolutionary, transformation of the world.

These, and similar issues, are at the heart of the agenda of the Global Justice movement and the World Social Forums that since Seattle 1999 have permitted the convergence of social and environmental movements in a common struggle against the system.

There is no reason for optimism: the entrenched ruling elites of the system are incredibly powerful,

and the forces of radical opposition are still small. But they are the only hope that the catastrophic course of capitalist “growth” will be halted. Walter Benjamin defined revolutions as being not the locomotive of history, but rather humanity reaching for the emergency brake on the train before it goes over into the abyss…

Footnotes

1. See John Bellamy Foster, Marx’s Ecology. Materialism and Nature (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
2. F. Engels, Anti-Dühring (Paris, Ed. Sociales, 1950), 318.
3. Joel Kovel, Enemy of Nature (London; New York: Zed Books, 2002), 215.
4. Daniel Singer, Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours? (New York:, Monthly Review Press, 1999) 259-260.
5. B. Traven, The White Rose (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1979).