

Socialism or Ecocide

Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe, while excellent and valuable in its own right, isn't quite the introduction to "green Marxism" that one might have expected. Michael Löwy is a veteran for decades of the democratic revolutionary left in France and a frequent contributor to *New Politics*. He provides, in *Ecosocialism*, five chapters—at least two of which have appeared elsewhere—making the case that, as Marx himself foresaw in *The German Ideology*, "productive forces in capitalism are becoming destructive forces, creating the risk of physical annihilation for millions of human beings" (ix). As Richard Smith has argued in these pages, any attempt at "green capitalism" simply will not work—and Löwy agrees, as capitalism's expand-or-die dynamic, its "short-sighted calculation of profit and loss" (8), will undermine at every turn any market-oriented attempt to defeat climate change. There is no alternative, one might say, but to "challenge the [capitalist] mode of production itself" in order to "suppress useless and/or dangerous production," to "replace fossil fuels with renewable energy sources," and, moreover, to break with the illusion that "individual asceticism and penitence" (x) can provide a solution to the ecological crisis. (In the real world, such asceticism is always expected more of the "average person" than of the ruling class, whose luxury consumerism does far more ecological damage than consumption by any individual in the working class or peasantry.)

Löwy convincingly explains that there is no reason for "red" and "green" ideas to be at odds. After all, "both socialism and ecology appeal to qualitative values—for the socialists, use value, the satisfaction of needs, social equality; for the ecologists, protecting nature and ecological balance" (2). In the book's opening chapter, originally published in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* in 2005, Löwy puts forth what has

increasingly become a sort of “common wisdom” on the radical left: “Ecologists are mistaken if they imagine they can do without the Marxian critique of capitalism. An ecology that does not recognize the relation between ‘productivism’ and the logic of profit is destined to fail—or, worse, to become absorbed by the system” (5). The history of European Green parties, once heralded as leftist alternatives to Social Democratic parties but now, at best, their junior partners in government, makes this quite clear. The now-marginal “deep ecology” current in “green” thought is of no use either, as its anti-humanism is not only incapable of building a movement that could actualize its goals, but embraces a pure relativism that places “all living species on the same plane” (6). Finally, a critique of consumption that lacks a Marxist class analysis fails to realize that what must be called into question is “the prevalent *type* of consumption, based as it is on ostentation, waste, mercantile alienation, and an accumulationist obsession” (9). This doesn’t mean that immediate radical reforms would be of no use, and as Löwy notes, it would be sectarian for socialists to stand aside from the battles for such reforms that are already going on, particularly in the Global South. (Löwy goes into great detail, all of it useful, on the Brazilian fight to save the Amazonian forest and devotes a chapter to the “Ecosocial Struggles of Indigenous Peoples.”) But it does mean that unless the road of what the left often calls “non-reformist reform” ultimately leads to a rupture with capitalism, the fight for such reforms will be in vain; witness the frequent formal acknowledgement of pro-ecology demands that are “emptie[d]...of content,” the Kyoto Protocol being the most obvious example (11).

Although Löwy engages in perhaps too much name-dropping in this book—he almost seems to think that the audience for *Ecosocialism* primarily consists of people who have heard of everyone from James O’Connor to Elmar Alvater—his discussion of socialists who historically had too little “ecological

consciousness" is insightful. And he doesn't limit his critique to the "socialists" who constituted the ruling elite of the so-called Communist countries, who ruled over societies that mirrored the productivism of capitalist ones, with disastrous consequences (such as the Chernobyl calamity). For example, Michael Albert, advocate of "participatory economics," comes in for criticism for advocating a type of "planning" that echoes "the existing technological and productive structure, and is too 'economistic' to take into account the global, sociopolitical, and socioecological interests of the population ... which cannot be reduced to their economic interests as producers and consumers" (31). More notably, Löwy criticizes the late Marxist political economist Ernest Mandel, the foremost representative of the (Trotskyist) Fourth International, to which Löwy belongs. He points out that Mandel, while an eloquent advocate of democratic economic planning, didn't incorporate an ecological critique of capitalism into his thought until the late 1980s; prior to that, he expressed skepticism of "rapid changes in consumer habits, such as the private car. ... [Mandel] seriously underestimates the impact that a system of extensive and free-of-charge public transports would have, as well as the assent of the majority of the citizens ... for measures restricting automobile circulation" (107-8).

Ecosocialism is not without its flaws. A few too many times—reflecting inadequate editing, perhaps—Löwy tells us that not only were social democracy and Stalinism productivist in both theory and practice, not only did the (anti-Stalinist) Marxist movement take too long to embrace an anti-productivist viewpoint, but that Marx and Engels themselves are somewhat "guilty" of productivism: "Passages in their writings to the effect that socialism will permit the development of productive forces beyond the limits imposed on them by the capitalist system imply that socialist transformation concerns only the capitalist relations of production, which have become an obstacle ... to the free development of the existing

productive forces” (21). Löwy goes so far as to suggest that the Soviet Union was an expression of this conception.

This is overstated. The question of Marx’s ostensible quasi-productivism has already been discussed at length in John Bellamy Foster’s *Marx’s Ecology* (2000). Further, the capitalism of the nineteenth century was hardly as destructively productive as the capitalism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; if for no other reason than to ensure that everyone could be certain that they would receive an adequate amount of consumer goods, there was good reason for Marx and Engels to posit that socialism itself would involve “developing the productive forces” beyond what then existed under European and American capitalism. Hence the idea in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875) that communism (socialism) would have first and second stages: the first characterized by relative scarcity (an inheritance from capitalism), the second involving not a complete transcendence of scarcity but the saturation of demand (as Mandel often wrote). At the time this wasn’t in tension with the Marxist understanding that “production for the sake of production” typifies capitalism; such production, then as now, was plainly not about guaranteeing that all people would have their basic needs met, let alone ensuring that everyone would be able to develop their innate talents and abilities to their greatest extent. Today, with capitalism literally threatening so much life on earth, a reconceptualization of socialist “stages” and the working class “taking over the productive forces” is certainly necessary—Löwy’s superb critique of the unbelievably wasteful advertising industry is particularly pointed—but to critique Marx and Engels for occasional “productivism” is essentially anachronistic.

Again, *Ecosocialism* is probably not the best introduction to “red-green” analysis; Chris Williams’ *Ecology and Socialism* (Haymarket Books, 2010) is overall the better bet. But Löwy’s book still deserves a wide readership—brief, informative, and

insightful, it could act as a sort of an eco-Marxist “volume two” after Williams’ work. If, to coin a phrase, we aren’t yet “all ecosocialists now,” we certainly should be; we clearly *must* be.