

Deep Ecology and Eco Anarchism- A dialogue

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“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

— Rachel Carson

The ecological security of the world we live in today has been all but completely compromised. Unrestrained human activity has insidiously undermined ecological processes and induced catastrophic outcomes which we now see manifesting in a multitude of forms, including severe environmental degradation, climate change, species extinction etc. Consequently, the dire disposition of the aforementioned circumstances have spawned a counter culture, who foster a deepening sense of discomfit and foreboding towards the extant industrial systems of production. It is from within this incipient nucleus of ecological anxiety, which engaged in a rebellion against the larger structures, that the ideologies of deep ecology, eco-anarchism and their ilk have emerged in the latter half of the 20th Century. Ecology, which by then was maturing rapidly as a field of inquiry during this period, provided the world with a new vocabulary to express the emergent concerns.

Touted as an ‘ecosophy’¹, Deep Ecology is claimed to have its roots in the direct experience of scientist-ecologists studying biodiversity and wildlife ecosystems out in the field. The corpus of literature detailing the ideological foundations of Deep Ecology derives from a myriad of sources, both popular and arcane, which include strains from romanticism, Eastern mysticism, indigenous knowledge systems and general ecological science. The elementary principles of Deep Ecology include the acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of all life, the ascription of a biotic equality to every living organism and an explicit rejection of anthropocentrism². However, adherents like George Sessions claim that Deep Ecology is not an ideological construct but, is on the contrary a comprehensive understanding of the processes and workings of nature, without the imposition of any sort of ideologies on it.

Considering its conception of the human race as subordinate to nature- as a small and dispensable blip in the larger scheme of things, and its trenchant criticism of the egregious display of

¹ Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist, who was one among the leading proponents of Deep Ecology, defined ‘ecosophy’ as a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium.

² Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are the most significant entity in the universe and the interpretation of the world in terms of human experience.

human hubris which seeks to manipulate all of nature to realize human ends, it is understandable that Deep Ecology continues to captivate and engage a passionate following. Through advocating a humbling of human ambition and by displacing humans from the focal point, Deep Ecology propounds a transcendentalist worldview which situates non-human life at the centre of the discourse. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that a considerable number of conservationist movements from across the world arose from a Deep Ecological consciousness. However, for all its tidings on a holistic understanding of natural processes and their indispensability, Deep Ecology continues to be inexorably mired in ideology.

For starters, Deep Ecology, while ostensibly rejecting anthropocentrism and ideological leanings, overlooks the fact that the imposition of any human symbolic discourse on nature becomes innately anthropocentric. Further, Deep Ecologists like George Sessions assert that all life forms have an equal 'right' to live and blossom. Here, too they are inadvertently resorting to anthropocentrism by projecting human socio-political categories, specifically, legalistic and bourgeois-humanist ones like abstract legal rights, onto nature.

Further, they equate the technocratic exploitation of nature and the utilitarian reductionism of its components into resources as an irredeemable consequence of the biological need of an over populous human species. There is an overt endorsement of the outdated Malthusian notions on overpopulation, while advancing such an argument. In truth, the assumption that the destruction of nature brought about by a post capitalist society is actually the outcome of our biological destiny, is quite absurd. By doing this, Deep Ecologists are only mistakenly conceiving of capitalism's affinity for chronic rapacity as something inherent to human kind. In a glaring oversight, they fail to acknowledge that benignant human cultures whose interactions with nature were intrinsically sustainable, had existed throughout human history.

In addition, Deep Ecologists, who almost invariably belong to countries from the global North, have also been known to recourse to Social Darwinism to berate third world countries for their backwardness. They extend this formulation to advocate, quite unapologetically at times, the genocide of these 'others' to help revert human population to, supposedly optimum levels. Such formulations which endorse a crude biological determinism is curiously arrived at by conflating concepts as disparate and incommensurate as the ecological carrying capacity and the invisible hand of free market economics. Moreover, even though Deep Ecologists view technology as something inherently problematic and embrace a certain ludditism, their criticism of technology remains myopic as it fails to take into account the relation of technology to extractive capitalist institutions.

To recapitulate, through its facile engagement with and constant mystification of the power relations of contemporary society, Deep Ecology generates major lacunae within its critique. It is in addressing these pitfalls of Deep Ecology and providing for a more comprehensive understanding of ecological catastrophes in relation to extant power relations in contemporary human society that Eco-Anarchism emerges in significance as an alternative worldview and ideological standpoint.

For instance, the Eco-Anarchist luminary, Murray Bookchin argues that the exploitation of nature is contingent on the power structures at play in a society. In his essay "Ecology and revolutionary thought", Bookchin emphasizes on the principles of diversity and spontaneity for the revitalization of complex ecological systems. He persuasively asserts that decentralized social structures which adopt direct democracy and humanist technology are a necessity to allow for the flourishing of diversity and spontaneity. Bookchin advocates a model of anarchy constituted

through the decentralization of power to relatively self-sufficient communities, as opposed to an oppressive, centralized and capitalistic state to foster a harmonious and organic interrelationships between humans and other forms of life.

The eco-anarchist model put forth by Bookchin rejects the uncritical primitivism and reductionist view of technology endorsed by Deep Ecology. It also demystifies the power relations in the society, while providing a trenchant critique of capitalism and the extant systems of production. Further, the Eco-Anarchistic worldview stresses on human agency rather than alluding to the problematic biological determinism of Deep Ecology. As opposed to the Deep Ecological focus on a transcendentalist schema, Eco-Anarchism roots itself in immanence, particularity and locality, thereby exploring the possibility of anthropocentric and pragmatic solutions for a brighter future. In doing so, Eco-Anarchism engages in a conversation with the past and the future instead of constantly being stuck in redundant romanticisations of the past.

It needs to be re-emphasized that Deep Ecology and Eco-Anarchism seem to share a highly ambivalent relationship. While both ideologies share a sense of rebellion against the prevalent mechanics of the world, they do so for conflicting reasons. While Deep Ecology's reductionist understandings of human society and its advocacy of certain concepts like Malthusianism and Social Darwinism betray a certain imperialist and Eurocentric privilege, Eco-Anarchism concerns itself with providing a more astute and complex critique of power relations. Hence, while Deep Ecology remains indifferent to human agency, Eco-Anarchism emphasizes on empowering communities and individuals- thereby addressing a major lacuna in Deep Ecological thought. One of Bookchin's seminal essays critiquing Deep Ecology is titled "How Deep is Deep Ecology?" My pick for an answer would be, as one of my close friends quite discerningly put it, "simultaneously too deep and not deep enough."

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