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Ecology and its recuperation by capitalists

Brian Morris

Long ago the biologist Paul Sears described ecology as the “subversive science”, and there is no doubt that when I first became involved in environmental issues in the 1960’s, ecology was seen very much as a radical movement. The writings of Barry Commoner and Murray Bookchin emphasised that we were confronting an impending ecological crisis, and that the roots of this crisis lay firmly with an economic system – capitalism – that was geared not to human well-being but to the generation of profit, that saw no limit to growth or technology, even celebrating the achievements of the “megamachine”.

Ultimately it was felt, by both Commoner and Bookchin, that capitalism was destructive not only to ourselves but to the whole fabric of life on the planet. For the underlying ethic of capitalism was indeed the technological domination of Nature, an ethic that viewed the biosphere as having no intrinsic value; it was simply a resource to be exploited – by capital.

Over thirty years ago Bookchin was thus describing capitalism as “plundering the earth” in search of profits, and was

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highlighting with some prescience — long before Al Gore and George Monbiot — the problems of global warming — that the growing blanket of carbon dioxide would lead to destructive storm patterns, and eventually to the melting of the ice caps and rising sea levels (in “Post Scarcity Anarchism” 1971:60).

This was in addition to the many other ecological problems that Bookchin identified as constituting the “modern crisis” — deforestation, urbanization, the impact of industrial farming, pollution of the oceans, toxic chemicals and food additives, and the wanton destruction of wildlife and the subsequent loss of species diversity.

Bookchin’s pioneering ecological critique of industrial capitalism has more recently been re-affirmed (with little acknowledgement to Bookchin!) in Joel Kovel’s excellent “The Enemy of Nature” (2002) — the enemy, of course, being global capitalism.

How things have changed! “Global warming” is now firmly on the political agenda, acknowledged by almost everyone apart from some die-hard right-wing neo-liberals, and everyone is being cajoled into finding ways to “save” the planet. Such hubris is quite mind-boggling! Humans are quite unable to destroy the planet; what they are doing through an economic system based on greed and exploitation, is making many parts of the earth virtually uninhabitable for humans and other life-forms.

“Ecology” or “green” issues have therefore now been embraced by individuals and groups right across the political spectrum. Even neo-Nazis claim to be anti-capitalist and to embrace the green perspective. So you will not be surprised to learn that the majority of major transnational corporations — including Shell, Nestle and Coca Cola — have leapt aboard the green bandwagon and are enthusiastically demanding that we all cut our carbon emissions.

So what is going on? Four tendencies, I think, are worth noting.

One is that capitalist corporations are now in the process of “greening” their public image. Something that the Shell corporation has been engaged in for several decades, given its awful record in terms of environmental destruction. It would be difficult to find any major transnational corporation these days that does not proudly acclaim and advertise its ecological sensibility and its “green” credentials.

Secondly, although most people now acknowledge that there is an environmental crisis, efforts are continually being made to convince us that this crisis has nothing to do with the capitalist economy per se. Deep ecologists have long been informing us that it is all due to a lack of spirituality, or that there are too many people, or even that humans are by nature either “aliens” or unwanted “parasites” on earth. Such misanthropic sentiments were long ago critiqued by Bookchin. So according to Jonathan Porritt (an adviser to New Labour on environmental issues) what we need is a suitable marriage between capitalism and spiritualism! Heaven forbid!

Development experts, in contrast, blame ecological problems, like deforestation, on the victims, the poor peasants, who because of their poverty and lack of modern agricultural techniques, are destroying — we are told — the forests. Whereas, of course, the main culprits are the logging companies, the mining corporations such as Vedanta and Rio Tinto, and the expanding ranching enterprises that cater for the increasing demand for meat.

Development experts long ago coined the concept “sustainable development”. This has nothing to do with the conservation of Nature; it is all about sustaining “development”, that is capitalist growth.

What also clouds the issue is the suggestion that global warming and other environmental issues, have nothing to do with an economic system geared to growth and private profit: it is solely due to the actions of individual “consumers”. So we are all being urged to do what we can to “save” the planet.

Thirdly, this laudable concern for the environment by transnational corporations is clearly a front to enable such corporations to seek further opportunities for capitalist expansion, and for generating even more profit. Thus industrial wind farms covering large tracts of the countryside, the increasing production of bio-fuels (at the expense of food production), and the expansion and export of the nuclear industry to all parts of the world, all three initiatives are heralded as great ways of cutting “carbon emissions” and thus helping to save the planet! But at what social and ecological cost? It is noteworthy that each of these initiatives is in the hands of big business, amply subsidised by western governments.

Finally, what we have also experienced in the last decades, as an accompaniment to the advocacy of green capitalism, is the emergence of the concept of “global management”. To safeguard the planet what we therefore need (we are told) is a plethora of conservation experts and eco technocrats to monitor the planet, and to offer advice to governments and transnational corporations on how we can best “save” the planet. But “saving” the planet, as Wolfgang Sachs argued (in “Planet Dialectics” 1999) is in fact little more than a justification for a new wave of state interventions into the lives of ordinary people.

Anarchists need to be wary and critical of each of these four tendencies. We need, therefore, to develop a project that combines socialism (not the radical individualism of Nietzschean aesthetes) and an ecological sensibility (not neo-primitivism) as the likes of Peter Kropotkin, Edward Carpenter and Eliséé Reclus suggested long ago.