# A Dialogue with Arne Naess on Social Ecology and Deep Ecology (1988–1997)

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# Contents

## Preface

In the spring of 1987, Donald Davis, an environmental sociologist at the University of Tennessee arranged a talk there by Murray Bookchin. At the time, I was working very closely with Bookchin, and I went there to meet with him and Davis, who had been a student and staff member at the Institute for Social Ecology. During the visit, Bookchin showed me the proofs for an article entitled "Thinking Ecologically: A Dialectical Approach," a large part of which was an attack on deep ecology, systems theory, Asian thought, and the radical environmental organization Earth First!

I was disturbed by what I read. I found it to be seriously lacking in careful analysis or nuance, and often to be unfair to the objects of attack. I suggested that he rewrite it, making sure that he did not over-generalize or misrepresent any positions. He replied, rather unconvincingly, that it was too late to make any changes, and he did not respond in any way to the content of my suggestions.[1]

What I did not know at the time was that he had recently written a much more extreme attack on deep ecology, in which he had parodied, and, indeed, demonized it to an extraordinary degree. The War of the Ecologies had begun.

The article in question was called "Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement."[2] It is noteworthy that although this article is one of the more analytically weak and theoretically inept efforts in the literature of environmental philosophy, it is the single text representing the position of social ecology that has been most widely reprinted. Not only has it appeared in various ecological and political publications, and in a collection on deep ecology, it has also been included in a number of environmental ethics texts."[3]

In this notorious article, Bookchin refers to "a vague, formless, often self-contradictory, and invertebrate thing called deep ecology" that has "parachuted into our midst quite recently from the Sunbelt's bizarre mix of Hollywood and Disneyland, spiced with homilies from Taoism, Buddhism, spiritualism, reborn Christianity, and in some cases eco-fascism." In addition to depicting deep ecology as such an invertebrate, parachuting, spiced thing, he accuses it of "preach[ing] a gospel of a kind of 'original sin' that accurses a vague species called humanity…which it sees as an ugly 'anthropocentric' thing—presumably a malignant product of natural evolution—that is 'overpopulating' the planet, 'devouring' its resources, and destroying its wildlife and the biosphere…" He indicts deep ecologists such as Dave Foreman, who "preach a gospel that humanity is some kind of cancer in the world of life."

Moving on to guilt by association, he observes that "it was out of this kind of crude ecobrutalism that Hitler, in the name of 'population control,' with a racial orientation, fashioned

[1] Later that Summer, I wrote to Gary Snyder that I was very troubled by the direction of Bookchin's thinking and actions, referring to "a very disturbing development that became apparent this summer at the Social Ecology Institute." I noted Bookchin's increasingly antagonistic and "polarizing" stance toward other ecological activists and theorists. I mentioned in particular his hostility to Deep Ecology and Earth First!, and note that we continued to debate Daoist philosophy but that "I now find that his mind is closed on the matter ," and "he makes dogmatic and ill-informed generalizations." Finally I lamented the fact that he seemed to be presenting me "the dilemma of [either] becoming an abject 'follower' or being rejected," and deplored the emergence of such "destructive conflicts within the still rather small ecological and Green tendencies in this country."

[2] Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement." *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, nos. 4–5 (summer 1987)

[3] For example, those of Desjardins, Schmidtz and Willott, and Pojman and Pojman.

theories of blood and soil that led to the transport of millions of people to murder camps like Auschwitz." He says that "the same [sic] eco-brutalism now reappears a half-century later among self-professed deep ecologists who believe that Third World peoples should be permitted to starve to death and that desperate Indian immigrants from Latin America should be excluded by the border cops from the United States lest they burden 'our' ecological resources." He concludes that deep ecology is "a black hole of half-digested, ill-formed, and half-baked ideas" that lies at "the depths of an ideological toxic dump."

Arne Naess, as the foremost philosopher of deep ecology, is not spared Bookchin's wrath. He calls Naess "the pontiff of deep ecology," implying that Naess claimed some kind of dogmatic authority over the movement. He also condemns Naess for his connection decades earlier with logical positivism, claiming that he was "an acolyte of this repellent school of thought for years."

## The Dialogue

The following year, in October of 1988, I received a brief note from Arne Naess asking for a copy of an article that I had written on Daoism and politics. In addition, he commented, "I read your article in The Trumpeter with pleasure!"[4]

The article, entitled "What is Social Ecology?" was written as the introduction for a collection I edited entitled Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology.[5] It generally follows Bookchin's interpretation of social ecology but also contains evidence of the divergent directions that Bookchin and I were soon to take. I describe social ecology as "a comprehensive holistic conception of the self, society and nature" that is based on the "ecological principle of organic unity-in-diversity" and which "rejects the dualism that has plagued Western civilization since its beginnings." I repeat Bookchin's ideas about evolution being a process "having directiveness and involving the progressive unfolding of potentiality" and tie this concept to teleological philosophical traditions.[6] I also link such ideas to the Daoist concept of Dao as the path of unfolding of a being, a connection that would later be harshly attacked by Bookchin.

Interestingly, I disassociate social ecology from both anthropocentrism and biocentrism, calling it an "ecocentrism, in the sense that it requires humanity to situate its good within the larger context of the planetary good, and to transform our often narrow rationality into truly planetary reason." I say that this is interesting because Bookchin would later attack ecocentrism, while some deep ecologists, for example George Sessions, would attack me for defending anthropocentrism and rejecting ecocentrism.[7]

Naess did not explain what he liked about the article, but I assume that he appreciated it as a synthesis of the general perspective of social ecology with concepts that have affinities with deep ecology.

In December of 1988, Naess sent me a brief letter thanking me for various articles I sent him. He comments with surprising optimism, "I am now completely relaxed about social ecology/ deep ecology. In the long run only joy will come out of the relation." Later in December, he

[4] "What Is Social Ecology?" in *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 5 (Spring 1988): 72- 75.

[5] John Clark, ed. *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social* Ecology (London: Merlin Press GreenPrint, 1990).

[6] I note that Bookchin rejected the term "teleology" because of his (in fact fallacious) association of the term with determinism.

[7] Later I rejected the term, since I began to question any idea of "centrism." I continued to accept the principles I had associated with it, but which I came to believe were more adequately conveyed by the non-neologism "ecological."

sent me a longer letter in which he begins by thanking me for a recent letter I had sent him, and commenting that "It will not be difficult for us to discuss." He continues (rather surprisingly, considering the date) by disassociating himself from a concept that has caused much controversy in ecophilosophy, that of "biospheric egalitarianism." This is particularly noteworthy because it is one of the seven characteristics of deep ecology that he discussed in the original deep and shallow ecology article.[8] Many sources (for example, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*[9]) still include the term in descriptions of his ecophilosophy. Actually, he had begun to question the concept at least as early as the 1984 article "Intuition, Intrinsic Value, and Deep Ecology,"[10] in which he wonders whether the concept might be doing more harm than good.

In the letter, he says, more decisively, that:

> I do not like the term "egalitarianism in the biosphere" any more. I reject the idea of equality as used for what I call a right to live and blossom. "There is a right that all living beings have, the right to live and blossom." The rights of one of these beings are not equal to the right of any other, nor not equal. The quantitative or topological relationship is misplaced. The right is *the same*. It is the same right they all have. Similarly, there is an intrinsic value or worth of which one may validly say that it [is] common to all living beings — as such. It is inherent in their status of living beings, and is independent of any relation to usefulness or to the classification of higher or lower development. If I in a provoked mood kill a mosquito I do not consider justifying this by reference to any higher intrinsic value of humans. But I certainly would somehow justify killing any kind of animal in certain kinds of situations. Very complicated norms are involved! There may be intrinsic values which humans realize and are unrealizable by animals. I do not talk about that.

Naess's position on this key issue was clearly evolving, and it has often been noted that he progressively qualified and weakened the moral implication of the concept. Yet, there seems still to be a fundamental ambiguity that needs to be resolved. What is the status of the "equal rights" that are still attributed to beings? And under what conditions should such rights be overridden? Later letters pursue these questions.

Naess's next letter, of July 11, 1993, is one of the most interesting. In it, he addresses three important topics: 1) the level of generality at which social ecology should be looked upon as an ecophilosophy; 2) the degree to which social ecology engages in specific social and ecological analysis; and 3) the importance of community.

He begins by observing:

> A week ago I left for the mountains with *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology* intending to go through the book carefully and write an article stressing positive aspects. Now 4 days are gone and I am gradually losing ground. I am more confused about the central issues dealt with in the book than I was when I started

[8] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary" in *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100.

[9] "Arne Naess" in Bron Taylor, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 1149–1150.

[10] Arne Naess, "Intuition, Intrinsic Value, and Deep Ecology" in *The Ecologist*, Vol. 14 No. 5/6, (1984): 201.

> reading a week ago. Your article at the head of the book I understand and appreciate. The first sentences make me believe that social ecology is an ecosophy in my sense, a total view in part inspired and motivated by the (increasing) ecological crisis. But: Is "social ecology" a name of one ecosophy or a class with basic common characteristics? I hope it is meant as a class-name, otherwise a *Gleichschaltung* [enforced conformity] is implied considering that there still are different cultures and people with great differences of backgrounds within a culture – and of course strong terminological idiosyncrasies. So my conclusion is: of course it is a class name.

Naess raises an important issue here. In fact, most of those who associated themselves with social ecology and the Institute for Social Ecology always saw it as a general viewpoint associated with themes such as ecological thinking, economic and political decentralization, alternative technologies, social justice and grassroots community. Bookchin's own writings were, however, increasingly refashioning it into a very specifically defined sectarian ideology and politics, which he came to call "dialectical naturalism" and "libertarian municipalism." In fact, Bookchin commented to me that most of the contributors to *Renewing the Earth,* a book dedicated to him and his work, didn't really understand social ecology. Naess's remarks show that he understood that the book reflected the divergence between my effort to preserve pluralism within social ecology, and Bookchin's developing project of ideological entrenchment.

In this connection, Naess mentions Bookchin's concept that the "human attempt to dominate nature stems from human domination of other humans." He comments that social ecology develops this concept "within a Hegel/Kropotkin philosophical frame of reference," which he judges to be "an excellent frame, and it is to be hoped it will inspire an *increasing* number of people." He says that he is not sure, however, whether social ecology should be "fixed" to that frame. He observes that it seems to be a larger movement "including supporters who either do not understand, or do not feel at home with that frame, or people who recognize and respect the frame, but feel coerced by an atmosphere of 'correct' thinking." Again, he makes a good point concerning diversity within social ecology. It was disturbing that precepts of Bookchin's own ecophilosophy were perhaps being imposed on a more diverse social ecology movement.

Next, he asks, "at institutes of social ecology and other places where social ecology is taught, do you discuss the main, pressing problems of the crisis, say, the areas discussed in *The State of the World 1988* or problem areas as listed in the writings of the World Watch Institute or in similar writings with world wide distribution?" Here, he points out a problem with social ecology that increasingly troubled me during the period in question. As a result of my interest in a wide spectrum of social and ecological issues and causes, and particularly after I became heavily involved in Indonesian, West Papuan and East Timorese issues around 1990, I increasingly found Bookchin's version of social ecology to be insular and out of touch with global political, economic, and ecological realities. I found that the literature of social ecology was focused on ideological debate, on vague, generalized attack and selfdefense, almost to the exclusion of either careful, informed analysis of phenomena, or careful, reasoned theoretical reflection.

Finally, Naess poses some important questions about the significance of decentralized and organic communities. He says that "especially in the 60s many in my circle were heavily influenced by Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*" and that "I found Tönnies' *Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft* valuable…" However, he says that he and his colleagues later observed that the traditional communities that came closest to the communitarian ideal no longer took good care

of their environments and that it became clear to them that centralized regulation was needed. His conclusion was that "in the years to come (30? 60? 100?) we need central authorities and we desperately need to counteract irreparable damage to resources." He comments, "I wish to know where in the world empowerment has *not* increased ecological unsustainability so far."

This is an area in which greater dialogue would have been useful. Both the global justice movement and materialist ecofeminism have shown that there is much to learn from indigenous people and women of the global South who continue to engage in caring labor that sustains both human community and larger ecological communities.[11] Though I am not sure to what degree the texts I sent to Naess reflect it, this is what I learned from my study of and work with the Papuan people in particular.

In a letter of November 9, 1993, Naess writes that he was glad to receive my last letter, which, he says, "marks a definite end to my worry about social/ deep ecology." He included with his letter a 700-word text entitled "Note on Social Ecology." As far as I know, this text has never been published. In it, he quotes Bookchin on "first and second nature," and comments that: the passage shows how the view "that the ecological crisis… stems from social crisis" is located at the center of "social ecology" as Bookchin uses the term**.** I permit myself to say that one may be a supporter of social ecology even when "social crisis" and "to stem from" are taken in a wide sense, wider than probably acceptable to Bookchin. For instance, I find it acceptable to say "the ecological problems which the ecological crisis raises are really social". That biologism – and ecologism – ignore the social (including economic and technological) factor is clear to me. We face grave social problems.

This is a very important comment. Naess "finds it acceptable" to state something that is very much like what Sessions and some other deep ecologists have attacked Bookchin and others for saying: that not only is the ecological crisis a social crisis, but that one-sidedly ecological views fail to address social, economic and technological issues adequately.

Naess then comments that:

> As to the ecological sensibility, its high level is a necessary, not a sufficient condition. The majority of a community may reach such a level, but economic and other forces may nevertheless determine an unecological policy. The supporters of the deep ecology movement are supposed not only to have that sensibility but to have it intimately related to their life philosophy or religiousness. With only people with a "pragmatic" leaning, and with rationality defined without relation to ultimate view, I disbelieve in a viable solution of the crisis.

Here social ecologists would raise questions about whether such an analysis strays into ungrounded idealism. The beginning is promising, since Naess points out that ecological sensibility is not effective in the face of entrenched institutional structures. However, his next point does not address how these structures might be changed, but rather the need for relating ecological sensibility to deeper-level ultimate values. The idea that change in sensibility must be accompanied by change in fundamental values is quite valid. However, large numbers of people can achieve certain forms of ecological sensibility, and also possess certain ecological ultimate views,

[11] See the important recent work of materialist ecofeminism, Ariel Salleh, ed., *EcoSufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2009).

but this in itself does not necessarily lead to ecological social transformation. The issue of the preconditions for effective practice and the crucial question of how pervasive fetishistic disavowal can be overcome obviously need to be confronted.[12]

In December 1993, I received a letter in which Naess replies to questions I raised about the Deep Ecology Platform in a (generally sympathetic) review of McLaughlin's book *Regarding Nature*.[13] He says that the review "contains some fairly critical sentences about my 8-point proposal of a 'deep ecology platform' which I have never seen before. They *ought* to have been announced before … others *should* already have put them forth if they had read the 8-point formulations in an analytically more sensitive mood." He then responds to some of the questions I raise and clarifies certain issues about the Deep Ecology Platform. For example, he admits that "the terms 'principles' and 'platform' are to some extent misleading," and that he now prefers "the rather long expression 'set of fairly general views.'" He explains that "these views obviously have premises not all of which are ultimate, according to the supporters of the views."

There is a gap in the letters for over two years, after which Naess writes in a letter of February, 1996, that "Some time ago I asked you to tell me what it was that you found unacceptable in deep ecology. Now you have sent a whole article which I read today." His quote from page two of the article shows that he is referring to my text "How Wide is Deep Ecology?"[14] This article appeared in 1996 in *Inquiry* and later in the collection *Beneath the Surface.* It might be illuminating to cite some of the content of this text at length.

In the article, I discuss several major points. First, I point out the value of Naess's "rules of Gandhian nonviolence," which he suggests can be applied to theoretical debates in ecophilosophy. Among the principles he recommends are the following: "choose that personal action or attitude which most probably reduces the tendency towards violence of all parties in a struggle"; "fight antagonisms, not antagonists"; "formulate the essential interests which [one] and [one's] opponent share and try to cooperate upon this basis"; and avoid anything that might "humiliate or provoke [an] opponent."

Secondly, I argue for the basic view of social ecology that ecological crisis can only be resolved through confronting social, political and economic realities. I note that "there are … billions of people who are de facto reducing ecological richness and diversity in order to 'satisfy' what are, without question, 'vital needs.'" They are thus doing what is permissible according to the Deep Ecology Platform. For this reason, it is necessary to confront "the institutional aspects" of the crisis while at the same time recognizing "the centrality of ideological, moral, and spiritual transformation." I contend that "to ignore or bracket these [institutional] aspects (as Naess does not do in his discussions of his own ecosophy, but as the platform does) will render deep ecology

[12] "Fetishistic disavowal" is a concept from Lacanian psychoanalysis popularized in contemporary social theory by the philosopher Slavoj Zizek. As a general term in social analysis, it refers to a mechanism in which the subject knows something, but acts as if he or she did not have such knowledge (epitomized by the French phrase "Je sais bien, mais quand même"—"I know very well, but nevertheless."). Classically, in Marx's analysis of the fetishism of commodities, the well-socialized capitalist consumer *knows* very well that the commodity is merely an object in a system of economic exchange, but nevertheless that consumer *acts* as if the commodity had mysterious powers. Similarly, the members of today's mass society increasing *know* very well that the dominant economic and political order is leading the world toward ecological catastrophe, yet nevertheless they *act* as if they do not know this (dutifully voting for representatives of that very order, engaging in edifyingly innocuous green consumerism, etc.).

[13] Andrew McLaughlin, *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993).

[14] "How Wide is Deep Ecology?" in E. Katz, A. Light and D. Rothenberg, *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 3–15.

superficial …" I point out "that if we want to understand the basis for … eco-destruction, we would do well to investigate carefully the operation of the world economy, the policies of nation-states, the nature of poverty in the [Global] South, systems of land tenure, economic inequalities, the policies of the World Bank, international debt, and many other political and economic questions."

Third, I contend that Naess's "conception … of open, constructive dialogue, and learning from diverse views … seems to conflict in some ways with a perspective that has been encouraged by George Sessions, the main American interpreter and historian of deep ecology. Sessions often presents deep ecology as presently formulated as being fundamentally beyond reproach and implies that any questions raised about its adequacy result from either ignorance or malice on the part of critics. His standpoint toward contending ecological viewpoints does not seem to reflect Naess's concern with minimizing antagonisms and engagement in open dialogue. Sessions seems particularly concerned to depict ecofeminists and social ecologists as being in sharp contradiction with the basic ideas of deep ecology. Yet, many ecofeminists, social ecologists, and others who take issue with certain positions that Sessions sees as basic to deep ecology would, I believe, have little difficulty accepting all the points of the deep ecology platform."[15]

Naess responded to this article with some enthusiasm. He says "I consider it a precious gift to my 84th birthday at the end of January. It is well written and so convincing. I feel sorry for my good friend George Sessions, but can only *very weakly* object to your description of his role in recent debates."

In response to my discussion of the preconditions for transformation, he says that "clearly, [the eight points of the Platform] do not specify a center of attention: 'What are we to do in order to overcome the ecological crisis? Which *must be* our priorities?' Here social ecology suggests an answer, and also ecofeminism. Both suggest basic causal factors leading to the crisis, and each suggests a main direction of fight to reach ecological sustainability and social justice. (Very important views belonging to level 3 in my "Apron Diagram.") And social justice is thought to be implied." Thus, he recognizes these views as "important." But does he accept the case?

As I read him, he finds my article "convincing" but he has not quite been convinced. He continues: "As I see it, a minimum of social justice is implied, but one of my sinister scenarios is a development of the Third World in the direction of Western consumerism. This *may* result in *a sort of* social justice, but ensures ecological catastrophe and opens the door for authoritarian regimes?" But does this concern really relate to the position of social ecology? The contention of social ecology (and also of materialist ecofeminism and ecosocialism) is that meaningful social

[15] In sections of the article that were cut before publication, I raised issues about the concept of biospheric egalitarianism. I mention that Naess states that "when forced to choose, he 'unhesitatingly and deliberately' steps on the Sa*lix herbacea* rather than 'the small, more overwhelmingly beautiful and rarer *Gentiana nivalis*,'" and I observe that "it would be hard to imagine what would indicate recognition of a greater right to life for one organism than another more than the decision to destroy one in preference to the other." I also point out that in "Deep Ecology in the Line of Fire" Naess says that the expression "biospheric egalitarianism" means only that all beings are equal in that they all have intrinsic value and "does not even logically imply that the intrinsicness has degrees or does not admit degrees.'" [Arne Naess, "Deep Ecology in the Line of Fire" in *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, 12:3 (1995) trumpeter.athabascau.ca.] He also states, in a discussion of human suffering caused by sleeping sickness, that "the flagellate Trypanosoma gambiensis" has "an unfathomable complexity of structure, but we recognize the human being as a still higher order of complexity." [Arne Naess, "Systemization of Logically Ultimate Norms and Hypotheses of Ecosophy T" in Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley, CA.: North Atlantic Books, 1995), pp. 38–39.] I observe that although his point is that protecting the human can be defended using the norm of "complexity!" that his analysis raises questions about any non-rhetorical force of his biospheric egalitarianism principle.

justice cannot be attained through a mere reform of global capitalism. Any form of social transformation that leaves "Western consumerism" not only intact but continuing its expansion to every corner of the global would signal the complete failure of the programs of these ecophilosophies.

In a letter of January, 1997, Naess showed himself to be quite open to possible evidence for connecting social domination and the domination of nature. He says that "What might be called Murray Bookchin's domination hypothesis has interested me since the 60's, but I am not acquainted with historical studies that confirm a relation between the level of domination people/people and people/nature. I am sure some social ecologists could help me. I would be grateful to you if you could bring me into contact with those who have studied that relation." Despite his optimism about the existence of such studies, I never found Bookchin or those who supported his view to be interested in careful analysis of the evidence. However, shortly I would send him my own analysis of the issue.

Naess also seemed very open to including concern about social domination in the platform. He suggests that "the wording of point 6 [of the Platform] should be changed for instance by adding 'in order to diminish and ultimately to eliminate human domination over humans (person/person and group/group domination)'" and he asks whether "Point 7 is perhaps too closely connected with the problematics of rich countries and the prevailing efforts to reach a level and kind of consumption of rich countries. It could stress the importance of communities with absence of domination." He suggests that "perhaps the level and areas of human domination over humans could by gigantic social and political efforts be significantly reduced within three generations. But without direct activism against ecological unsustainability the situation in the year 2100 will presumably be extremely serious, and the same holds good if we give up work to influence countries or areas where certain forms of human domination over humans are extreme."

Naess thus seems to be moving toward a greater recognition of the importance of the question of domination to the issue of ecological crisis. However, he does not really respond to the core of the social ecology position. To state this position rather starkly: there will be no solution to the ecological crisis without a solution to the problem of social domination. And we do not have three generations to find a solution to the ecological crisis.

In my next letter, in early August, 1997, I tried to address this question of domination more clearly. I said that I had written a long analysis of George Sessions' *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*,[16] and included a section on the question of domination. This section, along with about half of the entire text, was cut in the published version in *The Trumpeter*.[17] I mentioned that he was the first to see it other than the editor, David Rothenberg. That section goes as follows:

> Some deep ecologists have criticized ecofeminists for holding that the source of domination of nature is found in patriarchal domination of men over women, and have attacked social ecologists for holding that the domination of nature is rooted in the domination of humans by other humans. [For example,] Warwick Fox argues against ecofeminists and social ecologists "that 'it is possible to imagine a society that has realized social, racial, and gender equality, but is still ecologically exploitative.'" This argument supposedly refutes the contention by advocates of these two viewpoints that the solution to ecological problems is the overcoming of domination in human

[16] George Sessions, ed. *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (Boston: Shambala, 1995).

[17] "Reading Deep Ecology," published in abridged form as "Not Deep Apart" in *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 12 (1995): 98–104.

society (whether this domination is essentially patriarchal, or essentially a system of various interrelated forms of domination).

Fox's argument is based on a misunderstanding of certain aspects of social ecology and ecofeminism. First, neither theory is based on an ideal of social equality, and, in fact both would question this liberal, often economistic conception. But more fundamentally, the criticism overlooks the view of these theories that domination in society and domination of nature are dialectically interrelated. Bookchin writes of an "epistemology of rule" and Karen Warren of the "logic of domination," concepts that do not refer exclusively to relations between groups of humans, but rather to a comprehensive system of values and a peculiar sensibility. Thus, they address the quality of the whole of human experience. The kind of revolutionizing of values and sensibility envisioned by these theories could hardly be limited to certain social realms and have no implications for our attitude to nature. To assume this possibility suggests a certain psychological naïveté, a failure to consider the holistic nature of the psyche, or a misunderstanding of the transformative projects of these theories. In any case, while it is true that in unreflective consciousness, compassionate and destructive attitudes to the other can easily coexist, theories that call for fundamental reflection on the nature of domination and objectification seek to uncover exactly such contradictions.

Social ecology does not accept the simplistic division between realms of domination that Fox attributes to it. As a philosophy of dialectical holism, it studies human society as part of the natural world in constant interaction and mutual determination with the rest of the natural world. Overcoming human domination means coming to grips with the problem of domination by humans in nature–for there can be no humans dominating other humans in society somewhere outside of nature. For an authentic social ecology, there is no dualistic division between the domination of nature by humans and the domination of humans by humans. We are nature, and thus any form of domination is immediately a form of domination of nature. It is therefore impossible to reflect critically on any form of domination without confronting the issue of domination of nature. Furthermore, such dualistic projects as the domination of mind over body, of male over female, of civilized over primitive, and so forth are conceived in each case by the dominating consciousness itself as a kind of domination of nature, since that which is dominated is invariably assimilated into or reduced to nature. Thus, given the nature of the existing social imaginary, it is impossible to reflect on many traditional ideologies of domination without directly confronting the problem of the domination of nature.

I conclude by agreeing that Bookchin has not adequately defended his position, and noting that his view was in fact quite undialectical, but arguing that a stronger social ecological position exists that might be the focus of discussion.

In his reply of the same month, August, 1997, Naess begins with the slightly cryptic comment that "I have always been sure that you would send me a letter, and yesterday I received just what I wanted." Presumably he meant a letter on the issue of domination, which was an ongoing theoretical interest for him.

He comments that he has attempted to initiate dialogue with Bookchin, but that little has come out of it. I believe that he was referring to the fact that Bookchin was invited to contribute to the volume *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy.*[18] Unfortu-

[18] Witosek, Nina, and Brennan, Andrew, eds. *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

nately, instead of writing an article engaging in dialogue, Bookchin chose instead to send the inflammatory "Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology" in almost exactly the form that it had appeared over a decade before. Bookchin's text is followed by very brief responses by Naess and Andrew McLaughlin.

The collection also included Naess's conciliatory "Unanswered Letter to Murray Bookchin, 1988." In that letter, Naess expresses his "conviction that deep changes of 'economic, technological, and ideological structures' are required to radically change policies towards nature."[19] In other words, he asserts that change in social relations is a precondition for change in the relation between humanity and nature. Thus, even if he ignored entirely Naess's published writings, Bookchin knew almost a decade earlier that the gap between his own position and that of Naess was far narrower than he pretended.

In Naess's letter to me he reiterates his ongoing concern about how we might prevent the disputes among radical ecologists from being used to discredit the whole movement. He concludes with the comment that he is "Sorry that we have not met each other considering the many interests we have in common." This is something that I now regret very much.

In what I believe to be my last letter to Naess (August 20, 1997), I conclude with what I see as common ground between my conception of social ecology and some aspects of deep ecology. I comment on my efforts: to synthesize the dialectical and teleological tradition of Western thought with an Eastern critique of the self and identity coming from Nagarjuna, Taoism and Zen. Perhaps this is not possible, but I see the confrontation between these traditions as necessary and creative. I differ from Bookchin on dialectic in that he uses it to produce a "result" that is more reifiable, positive, and self-identical than I think possible. I take theoretical results in a more ironic, tentative, provisional way (to use inadequate terminology). I would stress the dynamic, self-transforming, critical, negating aspects of dialectic more than Bookchin.

Our reality must be seen as part of the "whole," but this whole is (as I think D. T. Suzuki put it) "an ever-becoming whole" for which our concepts always seek to "stop the movement," or achieve the impossible dream of one-sided rationalism. My idea of dialectic is not, like Bookchin's, to discover the "latent potentialities" in everything or to uncover the privileged "directionality" of phenomena, but rather to "think the movement"—to express our immersion in that ever-becoming wholeness. But on the other side, what is just as important is that we need to express our appreciation of what is attained in this process: the beauty, goodness, sacredness of the phenomenon … The dialectical holism that I'm working toward would also I think synthesize some of the seemingly conflicting approaches of deep and social ecologists.

In the last letter I received from Arne Naess, dated Aug. 27, 1997, he says: "I am now completely at ease about the deep ecology/social ecology relations." He remarks that "'The frontier is long!' and we need supporters of the deep ecology movement and we need social ecologists. As activists we do different things, and may differ in priorities. But, as I see it, there are not two conflicting approaches. You may, and others may, feel that the approaches are not only different, but conflicting. This does not make me sad at all. And we shall avoid biased descriptions of each other's views."

[19] The quoted phrase comes from the Deep Ecology Platform, point 6: "Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present." [Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), p. 70.]

Actually, his suspicions were correct, and infected as I am by dialectical thinking, I believe that they are conflicting, but they are also not conflicting, both conflicting and not conflicting, and neither conflicting nor not conflicting. Accordingly, I am very grateful that Arne Naess was with us to speak for the important truth of non-conflict. I am also sorry that his more subtle view was overwhelmed by certain louder and more manic partisans of conflict, and, finally, that we have not been able to move more quickly beyond both conflict and non-conflict to a deeper level of dialogue and dialectic.

## Postscript

Naess's hopes for respectful dealings between social and deep ecologists were unrealized not only because of Bookchin's obsessive vendetta. George Sessions, in "Wildness, Cyborgs, and Our Ecological Future: Reassessing the Deep Ecology Movement"[20] was still as late as 2006 presenting the saddest parodies of other ecophilosophies. Referring to "contemporary ecophilosophers, environmental ethicists, and environmental historians," and "the social ecologists, ecofeminists, and Callicott with his Leopoldian ethic," he charges that "these contemporary ecophilosophers and environmental ethicists have generally paid little attention … to the world's scientists' increasingly dire warnings about the global ecological crisis," something that many of them have been stressing for decades. He says that I believe that the most distinctive claim of social ecology is that "the human urge to dominate nature … results above all from human domination of other humans," which is in fact a view that I have criticized as being too simplistic. He also refers to my "attempts to defend social ecology's anthropocentrism," although I have attempted to show it to be nonanthropocentric in significant ways. He says that I now consider myself a "deep social ecologist," although in fact this is not my term but one used by Bookchin to attack me. He says I "now claim to support bioregionalism," although in fact I co-founded an early bioregional magazine[21] over twenty years ago, and have been close to the movement over all that time. He says I now "apparently support Ken Wilber's anthropocentric Hegelian spirituality," "apparently" because I am a friend and colleague of Michael Zimmerman, who is a proponent of Wilber's ideas. Finally, he states that I have "more recently … sought strong ties with ecofeminism," although in fact I have supported and written in support of ecofeminism for decades. Because of my suspect sympathies for ecofeminism, he questions whether I might also be a supporter of the "Cyborg Manifesto," something no ecofeminist I know has supported or even seen as being of particular interest. In the end, he dismisses social ecologists, including me, and ecofeminists in general, for "academic 'game playing' and political power trips involving a 'jockeying for position' which has basically obfuscated the issues and delayed realistic solutions to the ecological crisis." I can only conclude that the kind of constructive dialogue championed by Arne Naess is needed now as much as ever.

[20] In *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, Volume 22, Number 2 (2006); online at trumpeter.athabascau.ca.

[21] *Mesechabe*: *Greening and Reinhabiting the Mississippi River Watersheds*, founded in 1988, and later retitled *Mesechabe: The Journal of Surre(gion)alism.*

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