

# **Twenty-One Theses for the People's Ecology in the Twenty-First Century**

Social Ecology Cooperative

2014

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## **Introduction by Janet Biehl**

*The “21 Theses,” dated July 2014 and published in November 2015, marked the birth of the Social Ecology Cooperative in Paris. In May 2016 I had the opportunity to ask Patrick Farbiaz, one of its founders, what the cooperative meant by social ecology. He explained that it views ecology through the eyes of the poor in the global South. It advances an “ecology of liberation” inspired by the “theology of liberation,” a formulation of Christian doctrine seen through the eyes of the poor, especially in Latin America. This form of political ecology has strong overtones with the environmental justice movement that emerged in the United States in the 1970s, which sought to organize those most affected by environmental disasters—the poor, ethnic minorities, women—and with the more recent climate justice movement. These “21 Theses” advance the concept of a people’s ecology (écologie populaire), advanced by movement of the “popular classes,” those dispossessed by capitalist modernity on a global scale.*

*The affinities with Bookchin’s social ecology are clear, notably the social origins of the ecological crises; the distinction between environmentalism (inherently reformist) and ecology (which in political terms is socially revolutionary); the orientation toward the downtrodden; the concern for localization; and the bitter opposition to green capitalism.*

*The three founding members of the Cooperative Ecologie Sociale have been associated with the various evolving French Green parties (Les Verts, Ecology Europe, Ecology Europe-Les Verts, or EELV) since the early 1990s. Francine Bavay was elected in 2004 to the regional council for Ile-de-France and became second vice president in charge of social development, the social economy, and solidarity, health, and disability. She has since quit elective office and now organizes around local currency. Patrick Farbiaz works in the office of Noël Mamère, a deputy in the French National Assembly. Serge Coronado, an EELV officeholder, represents French nationals in Latin America and the Caribbean in the assembly.*

*I am publishing its English translation here out of respect for the cooperative’s effort to bring social ecology into the twenty-first century by casting it in global terms and for its emphasis on environmental justice. For more information about the cooperative, to see its other documents, and to consult the original French for this one, see its website at [Ecologiesociale.org](http://Ecologiesociale.org).*

## **Twenty-One Theses for the People’s Ecology in the Twenty-First Century**

The People’s Ecology is the political response of ecologists who refuse to resign themselves to the domination, exploitation, and alienation of the capitalist system. It renovates ecological thinking by proposing a new narrative of ecology based on a vision of the history of ecology and humanity outside the mainstream. Far from being an abstract model, it offers a concrete alternative in the face of the environmental crisis that threatens humanity. Building the people’s ecology will recast the ecology project by conjoining the historic force of the poor with the defense of the planet and the commons.

This manifesto starts with the simple idea that there are two ecologies, one from above and one from below. The from-above ecology advocates developing an economy based on green growth. It seeks to be, in effect, the spare tire in the globalized capitalist system. The other ecology is the from-below struggle of the popular classes for survival, and for meeting their needs in terms of

access to ecological resources. Between these two ecologies, the gap is widening every day, and it is necessary to choose. And considering the shock that is coming, the alternative must be a political ecology.

1) **The global crisis that we are experiencing is multidimensional: it is financial, economic, social, cultural, identitarian—and ecological.** This last feature is the radically new element that is driving the world toward an existential choice: the barbarism engendered by market fundamentalism or a politics of civilization in the lands of “living well.” The capitalist system, engaged in a logic of destruction, cannot be reformed, even if the green economy is making a final attempt to salvage a solution to its crisis. The “civilizing mission of capitalism,” based on the development of productive forces and defended by liberal thinkers as well as by socialists, has led to disruptions of major balances in the earth system that are poised to render human life impossible.

Capitalism is incompatible with respect for natural limits. The ever more rapid destruction of ecosystems, the disruption of the climate, chemical pollution and diseases it causes, the rapid decline of biodiversity, the degradation of soil, the destruction of the rainforests, global social apartheid produced by the brutal development of inequality, and the rise of identitarian and religious violence are the main symptoms. These crises stem from the mode of production that became dominant over two centuries —capitalism—and the resulting patterns of consumption and mobility. This ecologically and socially unsustainable mode of development is leading the biosphere to collapse.

2) **The only force that has anticipated this crisis is political ecology.** Political ecology has several currents, but alone among all political families, ecology considers it necessary to change the model of development by reducing our ecological footprint, by defending the ecosystems of the planet against predators, and by protecting the commons while meeting fundamental social needs. Ecology founded on the principles of autonomy, responsibility, and equilibrium calls for embracing universal values of protecting the land and human and non-human rights. The ecology movement became political in the 1980s in Europe and in other wealthy countries when the defense of daily culture converged with the question of the survival of the human species and the inclusion of specific methods of implementing democracy. It was organized by the Green parties, whose social base corresponded to the post-1968 student generation that had grown up during the affluent postwar decades. This social base can be referred to as the middle class, which has high cultural capital at its disposal and lives in the urban centers of large cities; it has configured political ecology in its own image and functions in its own interests. It advocates a politics of greening that sets standards from above and that regards adaptation to capitalism by means of a green economy as the horizon of political ecology.

3) **Another ecology, issuing from the historical force of the poor, the ecology from below, arose in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.** This plebeian ecology, emerging from the large majority of the planet, animates everywhere struggles for the survival of humanity and of biodiversity. Native to the social periphery, it mobilizes millions of women and men against the financial and industrial oligarchy that is destroying the planet and threatening the survival of humanity and the conditions for life among the dispossessed throughout the world: against the destruction of forests, against large dams, against the extraction of oil and mineral resources, and for the survival of their languages and their cultural diversity, against industrial disasters, against environmental racism. ... The ecology from below currently has not been translated into a formal politics. When it appears within the green parties, it is most often a minority.

It is expressed in organized social movements (MST in Brazil, Via Campesina, indigenous movements) and in the popular uprisings (the Water War in Bolivia, riots in China, anti-dam movements in India). It is still seeking its references, but already it has become indispensable, especially during such major meetings of political ecology as RIO + 20 or when tens of thousands of ecologists demonstrate against the green economy and its consequences and express through the Climate Justice network the requirements of social ecological movements ... Gradually, the people's ecology is spreading in Western countries, in peasant communities fighting industrial agriculture and the chemical industry, in popular neighborhoods where pollution is invisibly concentrated, and diseases related to the environment, the consumption of junk food and the resulting obesity. Faced with the accumulating social and ecological injustices, a new political ecology is both necessary and possible.

4) **These two poles of political ecology have their roots in an earlier story that has been divided since its inception.** Since the nineteenth century, a gap has widened between the scientific ecology from above, formed into large part by colonial science, hygienism, conservationism, and social Darwinism. Driven by the positivist ideology and the religion of unlimited progress, ecology from above influenced the first ecologists, often naturalists and environmentalists, in the twentieth century. On the other side, ecology from below is an ecology of transformation, of the people's ecology, emerging from the struggles of workers, peasants, and anticolonial peoples for survival. Struggles for survival are foundational to the people's ecology. The popular classes will defend not only their material conditions of life but also their natural environment, as capitalist modernity destroys their civilization.

Capital has destroyed the conditions of life and work of communities of peasants and artisans in the name of Progress, Science, and Reason. In this sense the Right as well as the Left have achieved a historic compromise based on liberal individualism. If we want to stop this process, the first task of the people's ecology is to decolonize the collective imaginary of the left and of ecology in fighting this religion of Progress and Scientism, which is the basis of middle-class domination over the popular classes. The Terra Nova Foundation calls leftists unconcerned about the future "bobos," since they have de facto abandoned the popular classes in favor of abstention or the National Front; in so doing, they are following the logic of socialism and scientific ecology in despising the socialism of their origins, of workers, indigenous peoples, and peasant movements, claiming they are now archaic. The decolonization of the imaginary thus contributes to the re-discovery of the values and history of the disinherited, who are the exact opposite of the market society based on profit and competition exacerbated among individuals: they represent consociation, concern for others, the common ownership of land, the gift, mutual aid, cooperation, and civility.

Patrick Farbiaz and Francine Bavay of the Cooperative Ecologie-Sociale in Paris

5) **The people's ecology was born in the nineteenth-century ecology of workers' associationism, agrarian populism, Luddism, civil disobedience, and libertarian geography.** Workers' associationism is the taproot of the social and solidaristic economy; Luddism is the root of the critique of industrialism and mechanization; agrarian populism emerged from struggles and wars of rural communities to defend their lifeways and existence against the development of another relation to earth and to commodification; civil disobedience originated in methods of noncooperation in struggles used from Thoreau to Gandhi and passing through the Landless of Brazil; the libertarian geography of Reclus and Kropotkin, countering sociobiology, developed the concept of mutual aid and cooperation.

The official history of ecology recounts its emergence as a passing of the baton from scientific ecologists to environmentalist and naturalist movements with bourgeois sensibilities toward nature. After 1968, a set of currents, born in the 1970s, from a cultural and generational movement nourished by various influences (feminism, Third World, pacifism and nonviolence, libertarian, socialist self-management) came together and gave birth to political ecology and the green parties. This story is false because it deliberately omits the ecology of the poor, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries never ceased to fight capitalist modernity and the damage wrought by Progress.

6) **The people's ecology, from its premises, is a rupture with the capitalist system with its limitless exploitation of resources, globalized trade, and capital accumulation.** Four key types of globalization underlie the ecological crisis.

- *The first globalization* was the triangular Atlantic trade system, based on human slavery, which resulted in the destruction of indigenous peoples and put in place extractivism, the grabbing of natural resources and raw materials.
- *The second globalization*, based on coal and steam energy, generated wage labor, forced labor, and productivism, that is, the religion of production based on the profits reaped by colonial empires. Meanwhile enclosures put an end to the common ownership of land and transformed millions of peasants into extensions of machines. The destruction of the peasant community coincided with the birth of the industrial proletariat.
- *The third globalization*, generated by oil exploitation, was that of Fordism and electricity, of consumerism and alienation.
- *The fourth globalization*, using nuclear power, peak oil and renewable energy, is contemporary with the planned obsolescence of products and of humanity itself. This era will lead either to barbarism and chaos or to a humanist Renaissance based on global citizenship and empathy. The current globalization threatens the very existence of humanity.

Reading these four globalizations through an ecological prism shows that capitalist modernity has always been based on the exploitation of the working classes and the destruction of their ecosystems. Those who are dominated have never ceased to contest the domination of human and of nature, as evidenced by Indian resistance, runaway slaves, slave revolts, riots and peasant wars, struggles for the rights and the health of workers, and nowadays the resistance to extractivism, huge dams, deforestation, and large unnecessary projects.

### **What Is the People's Ecology?**

7) **The people's ecology is neither mainstream nor neutral.** Ecology is intimately involved with social relations and confrontations from local to global. It places at the center of its thinking the conflict between the popular classes and the political and economic oligarchy, for the simple reason that all parts of humanity do not experience the ecological crisis in the same way. Inequalities in income, power, and cultural fluency, which lie at the root of ecological crises, ensure that some of us lack the capacity to protect ourselves from its effects. The aim of the people's ecology is to eradicate social inequalities, starting by decommodifying water, air, earth and in general all public goods (health, education, culture).

The financialization of the world is the highest stage of the fetishism of commodities, where the only standard is King Money and the level of material wealth is the index of calculating happiness. The people's ecology, against the dictatorship of the economic, has taken sides, and its preference for the poor finds strength in defending the living conditions of the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed, the outcasts, and the unseen, to better fight ecological disaster. The crisis in climate, energy, and ecology will not be resolved within the mainstream but in the confrontation between the forces of the global economy and the people who are directly threatened by the crisis.

8) **The people's ecology is a political and ideological current of the Green and international ecology movements.** It radically distinguishes itself from other tendencies:

- *Environmentalism.* This tendency reduces political ecology to nothing more than protection of the environment. But political ecology is a comprehensive and systemic approach to the relations among people, society, and nature. An environmentalism that only defends wildlife limits itself to one aspect of ecology and becomes NIMBY-type corporatism when it enters the political field.
- *Deep ecology.* This form of antihumanism emerged from conservationism, which has always excluded human beings from the ecosystem. Founded by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, this school of thought is based on biocentrism, which reduces to antihumanism. Although the people's ecology criticizes anthropocentrism, it is not to be confused with an ecology that sets human beings outside nature
- *Liberal ecology, sustainable development, green economics,* and in general all those who want to place ecology in the service of greening capitalism. Liberal ecology, which reveres efficiency, is based on the commodification of ecology. It believes that Nature has a price and that its economy can be regulated to preserve Nature for future generations. Supporting a historic compromise with the capitalist system, which it considers invincible, and develops suitable mechanisms like carbon markets ....
- *The people's ecology.* Pursuing the ecology of transformation, this radical ecology includes supporters of de-growth, social ecology, and eco-socialism. The ecology of transformation believes that capitalism cannot be reformed, and it sets about creating the conditions for overcoming it, through social practices, concrete struggles, and the elaboration of a political project that takes recourse neither to the laws of the market nor to the state as the supreme savior.

9) **The people's ecology is not eco-socialism.** It is not a copy-and-paste of the theses of scientific socialism and ecology. It is not a successor of productivist socialism but exists as an alternative to it. So-called "scientific" socialism is based on belief that the development of productive forces desired and supported by the bourgeoisie has created the conditions for its own overthrow by the very class it helped form, the modern industrial proletariat.

This concept was reinforced by the ideology of Progress, the deification of science and technology, the development of technology at all costs regardless of its consequences, the disproportionate importance given to the role of the nation-state, and the negation of community identities. But capitalism went on to destroy peasant communities, the lifeways of artisans and tradespeople, and it enlisted millions of workers in an industrial army with no reference beyond the industrial

and productivist revolution itself. In the colonies, it attacked ancestral civilizations based on the lands of the people it claimed to assimilate and civilize...

The critique of technology is another difference between eco-socialism and the people's ecology. Marxism believes that technology is a neutral instrument that can and must be put at the service of the working class, that technology is a decisive factor for social transformation and progress. By contrast, the people's ecology considers that technology is becoming ever more autonomous and is endangering the earth and humankind. Nonetheless, eco-socialism is the intellectual tendency closest to the people's ecology. The overlaps are numerous, and they can work together as part of the same international network.

10) **The people's ecology is not the same as de-growth.** Even if the principles of de-growth are applied to the entire world system, the people's ecology still finds it necessary to guarantee food, education, and health for the popular classes. Fair cultivation in these areas requires a model of eco-development based on social and ecological justice. In the South, in the poorest countries, but also in emerging and Western countries, this can translate into a policy of reparation (such as compensation for financial or ecological debt). The popular classes who have been excluded from the system may then get a boost through the growth of consumption and production in some areas. If decline in the ecological footprint is to be an absolute rule, it must not come at the expense of the popular classes. De-growth cannot mean recession. On the contrary, it must replace the quantitative growth of capitalism and its logic of accumulation with the logic of qualitative growth, which implies significant quantitative de-growth primarily in the dominant capitalist countries.

11) **The people's ecology is an ecology of liberation.** It is an ecology of the poor in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Its founding figures are Chico Mendes, Vandana Shiva, and Ken Saro-Wiwa. It holds that the connections between Mother Earth and the poor prohibit the commodification of water, air, and earth. By liberating themselves, the poor liberate all of humanity and preserve the planet and all its components. The ecology of liberation has as a foundational principle that the earth is not to be owned.

The ecology of liberation is an ecology of survival. It demands access to rights as defined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the rights to housing, health, and food.

The ecology of liberation has a spiritual dimension characterized by a rapprochement between Christian liberation theology and the idea of Mother Earth that is found in the peasant communities in the Andean highlands and elsewhere.

12) **The people's ecology is an ecology of environmental justice.** This movement, born in the United States in the 1980s, struggles against ecological racism. The ecological crisis does not have the same impact in poor neighborhoods as it does in wealthier ones. Environmental inequalities merge with social and ethnic inequalities to structure a territorial and ethnic-social discrimination. The people's ecology is anti-discriminatory. In this sense it has a very strong relationship with the social ecology theorized by the libertarian ecological activist Murray Bookchin.

13) **The people's ecology is an ecology of the commons.** The commons originated as an achievement of the farming community especially in the fight against "enclosures," and it is at stake in social and ecological struggles today. Whether it opposes the patenting of life, land grabs, the appropriation of cyberspace, the privatization of culture, or control over natural resources and raw materials, the struggle for the commons is basic to the new ecological struggle of the peoples. The commons is reclaiming common goods, collective intelligence, and ancestral skills such as practical information that resists privatization.



14) **The people's ecology is a transnational and alter-globalizing ecology.** It rests on organized social forces such as the peasant movement (La Via Campesina), movements against deforestation and large dams, the movement for Climate Justice, the movement against the imposition of useless large projects, the movements of indigenous peoples for survival, the movement for free software, and eco-unionism. It participates in the alter-globalization movement at social forums.

15) **The people's ecology has affinities with eco-unionism.** Workers' struggles against social and environmental injustices are part of the people's ecology. Struggles for occupational health against asbestos, lead poisoning, and toxic products are an essential dimension. The people's ecology, like eco-unionism, advocates self-management. It advocates the direct management of companies on a federalist and decentralized model but also user-citizen control over production and the environment.

16) **The people's ecology is eco-feminist.** The patriarchal capitalist system has oppressed and exploited women as it has land. Eco-feminism holds that protecting of the integrity of life in all its forms against patriarchal domination is a unified fight. Industrialism has turned not only nature but the female body into merchandise. The domination of nature by humans is intrinsically linked to the domination of women by men. Humans cannot establish a new relation with nature without changing human relationships between women and men. Eco-feminism advocates principles such as reciprocity, mutual aid, solidarity, sharing, trust, care for others, respect for the individual, and responsibility with respect to all ecosystems.

17) **The people's ecology is cosmopolitan.** The preservation of human diversity is an essential element in the struggle for the defense of the planet. Six thousand peoples compose the planet, and the preservation of their languages, cultures, and identities is a key feature of the ecological struggle. Financial globalization tries to standardize culture by imposing a standardized language and cultural production. The war of civilizations advocated by the American neoconservatives in the 1990s gave rise to a globalized racism against people who reject the new world order. There is no national ecology. The people's ecology is borderless and fights for global citizenship. Cosmopolitanism is the humanism of the twenty-first century.

## **The Strategy of the People's Ecology**

18) **The people's ecology fights for the creation of a new historic bloc: the coalition for the commons.** The struggle cannot depend on the cultured urban middle classes but must bring together those who represent the modern proletariat: intellectual workers, the precariat, parts of the industrial working class, petty officials, and peasant-workers. The people's ecology's allies in this new historical bloc are all the movements that fight for access to rights for everyone and for ecological democracy. This bloc is a coalition for the commons, among those who are fighting for physical common goods (water, earth, air) and so for the survival of humanity and those who fight for intangible common goods (information, culture, cyberspace) against the new enclosures. This bloc is a numerical majority. The great mass of working people share this desire for a revolution for the commons and for access.

19) **The people's ecology seeks an ecological transition based on an alternative model of development that takes into account human needs and the limitations of the planet.** It rethinks the social utility of production, ways of consuming, the purpose of our products, and how they are produced. It advocates the relocalization of economic activity and the conversion

of useless or predatory activities, and the redistribution of wealth and work. In the fight against productivist agriculture, it highlights agro-ecology and respects the peasantry's ancestral knowledge. The transitional program includes:

- an energy and industrial policy with a notable tightening of energy conservation, an end to nuclear power, the nonexploitation of unconventional sources of fossil fuels, and the use of local renewable energy
- the relocalization of the economy to avoid forced displacements and to restore control and fair resource sharing at the local level. It supports an informal popular economy and a new post-capitalist economy solidarity economy...

To develop society's resilience to the ecological crisis, we must collectively prepare to anticipate the impact of peak oil and climate change on energy. ... [We must develop] global, continental, national, and regional public policies enabling democratic ecological planning; support struggles for the recovery of natural resources, common goods, and food sovereignty; and construct spaces for economic cooperation by developing a plural economy encompassing the private sector, a social and solidaristic economy, and public services. ...

20) **The people's ecology rejects the professionalization of politics and its separation from struggles for social and ecological emancipation.** The popular classes do not need specialists in politics. They want to decide on the conditions of their lives, their work, and their environment from local to global. Politics is everyone's business. It is strong where social and environmental movements exist and express their force for transformation. It is weak where they do not. The people's ecology cannot be absorbed into a party, although it can become a component of various movements, parties, or fronts. The people's ecology is based on popular initiatives, self-managed struggles, the construction of democracy from below, and communal relations. So it returns to the origins of utopian and libertarian socialism, which initially wanted a collective, dynamic, and solidaristic response to liberal individualism, to the destruction of trades and rural communities, the dispossession of the popular classes by the industrial revolution, and their enslavement to the capitalist system.

The people's ecology finds the Charter of Amiens [of 1906] to be outdated. The formal separation between labor unions, associations, and parties was imposed by the industrial revolution. Similarly, the centralized organization of political parties dates to that time. Today social change movements must co-develop a political project and set it in motion. Doing politics differently presupposes practicing democracy thoroughly, abandoning internal competition for paid positions in favor of cooperation. However, faced with this historic task, the people's ecology movement cannot develop without a forum for political and theoretical elaboration, a capability to combine social forces engaged in the struggle, and the ability to articulate general perspectives and offer them as public policy. The movement that assumes this role must reject the outdated organizational pattern of a vanguard, with a program developed in isolation as a pre-determined model. It must therefore organize itself as an autonomous tendency within the ecology movement.

Our attempt to construct a political cooperative ... was an advance over the party form, which has become obsolete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The separation between those who are said to be competent and those who are not, between political actors and union militants, belongs to the politics of the industrial revolution, where the popular classes were reduced to carrying out tasks. In fact, for the collective intelligence of the entire party and the society, it substituted the domination of

one small group that imposed itself vertically on the rest. The conditions for that type of organization have collapsed. Inventing a party form suitable for the age of the network, of horizontality, is the task of the people's ecology.

21) **The people's ecology supports the construction of communal democracy.** The people's ecology cannot build an alternative on the basis of elections alone. Without deep involvement of the population at all levels, democracy cannot exist today; otherwise it becomes a de facto census. The oligarchy has a stranglehold on the media, advertising, and polling, and it organizes democratic debate on its own terms. Citizens who want to reclaim politics must do it from the bottom, starting by federating transitional initiatives made by local communities engaging in social transformation and adopting values of the people's ecology: autonomy, equality, dignity, and mutual aid.

Political ecology seeks not to take power but to change society from below while simultaneously using the path of institutions, protest, and social experimentation. This strategy implies the exercise of power issuing from below, controlled by citizens mobilized in line with the federalist and self-management movement. It continues today in the social movements that want to liberate spaces rather than frontally attack state power. It does not exclude the question of the state from its thinking, but it considers that the transition will give rise to a system of self-government where citizens establish their own power in municipalities, regions, and companies. The political organization must help implement these self-government practices and without replacing them.

Communal democracy presupposes the construction of a federative republic at all levels. The federalist principle will not be applicable to the European continent or to the world system if it does not apply at the national, regional, and local levels.

Regarding political alliances, the people's ecology holds that the participation of majority coalitions for social transformation is the way for ecologists to become the cultural and political majority, but in countries where social liberalism has destroyed the basis for social democracy, leading to antisocial and anti ecological policies, participation in social liberal governments marginalizes political ecology and makes it an agent for green capitalism. We must participate in the construction of a social and ecological opposition, strengthening the presence of ecologists in all local, regional and European elections where autonomy can be built, and negotiate majority contracts in parliament, but refuse to participate in social-liberal governments that are the most effective instruments of capitalist modernity.

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