

## WHY ECOSOCIALISM TODAY?

By Joel Kovel

*Homo sapiens* has been contending with its effects on nature since Paleolithic days and the first great extinctions wrought by hunting bands. But it was not until the 1970s that these became experienced as a great ecological crisis threatening the future of the species. The modern environmental movement was born in that moment, with its Earth Days, green parties and innumerable NGOs signalling that a new, ecologically aware age had arisen to contend with the planetary threat.

The optimism of those early years has now quite faded. Despite certain useful interventions like greater recycling of garbage or the development of green zones, it is increasingly apparent that the whole mass of governmental regulations, environmental NGO's, and academic programs has failed to check the overall pace of ecological decay. Since the first Earth Day was proclaimed, in fact, the breakdown in crucial areas such as carbon emissions, the loss of barrier reefs and deforestation of the Amazon basin, has actually accelerated and even begun to assume an exponential character.

How do we explain this grim fact, the awareness of which should inspire the most vigorous efforts to go beyond the limits of present-day environmentalism? Perhaps Margaret Thatcher should be heeded here. In the later years of the 1970s, the very decade that was to usher in the environmental era, the "Iron Lady" Prime Minister of the UK announced the rise of "TINA," such being the acronym for her slogan that "*There Is No Alternative*" to the given society, and certainly no alternative of the sort envisioned by the first wave of environmentalists.

What had happened was that environmentalism had missed the point, and was dealing with external symptoms rather than the basic disease. Thatcher did not spell it out in detail but there is no mistaking what she had in mind and stood for: There was to be no alternative to *capitalism*—to be exact, the renascent, harder-edged kind of capitalism which was being installed during the 70s in place of the welfare-state capitalism that had prevailed for much of the century. This was a deliberate response to a serious accumulation crisis that had convinced the leaders of the global economy to install what we know as *neoliberalism*. Thatcher was emblematic, along with Ronald Reagan in the US, of its political face.

Neoliberalism is a return to the pure logic of capital; it is no passing storm but the true condition of the world we inhabit. It has effectively swept away such measures as had inhibited capital's aggressivity, replacing and replaced them with naked exploitation of humanity and nature. Its tearing down of boundaries and limits to accumulation is known as "globalization," and is celebrated by ideologues, such as fools like Thomas Friedman, as a new epoch of universal progress borne along on the wings of free trade and unfettered commodification. This blitzkrieg simply overwhelmed the feeble liberal reforms which the environmental movements of the 1970s had set forward in order to check ecological decay. And as they have little or no critique of capital, they drift helplessly in a time of accelerated breakdown.

Thus it is time to recognize the utter inadequacy of first-wave environmentalism's basic premisses and forms of organization. The urgency behind this recognition is nothing else than the profound and indeed unprecedented changes in human existence portended by the ecological crisis. And the path it opens is given in the insight that it is capital itself that places us on a track to ecological chaos. There are many complexities about capital's responsibility for the ecological crisis, but one overriding tendency: that capitalism requires continual growth of the economic product; and since this growth is for the sake of capital and not real human need, capital's effect is the continual destabilization of an integral relationship to nature. The essential reason for this lies in capitalism's distinctive difference from all other modes of production, that it is organized about the production of capital itself, a purely abstract, numerical entity with no internal limit. Hence it drags the material natural world, which very definitely has limits, along on its mad quest for value and surplus value, and can do nothing else.

We have no choice about the fact that the ecological crisis portends radical change. But we can choose the kind of change, whether it is to be for life or death. As Ian Angus puts it in his listserve, *Climate and Capitalism*, the choice is simple enough: "EcoSocialism or Barbarism: There is no third way"<sup>1</sup>

This is a paraphrase of the great Rosa Luxemburg's saying of the early twentieth century, that the real choice before humanity

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<sup>1</sup> To learn about and/or join this list, contact Angus at [ecosocialism@gmail.com](mailto:ecosocialism@gmail.com).

was between "Socialism or Barbarism." Quite true: the failure of the socialist revolutions, both immediately as in the case of Luxemburg and the Spartacist uprising in Germany, and subsequently, through the failure of the other socialisms of the twentieth century, especially those organized around the USSR and China, has been a condition for the present triumph of barbaric capitalism, with its endless wars, nightmarish consumerism, ever-widening gap between rich and poor—and most significantly, the ecological crisis. So the choice remains the same, except that capitalist barbarism now means ecocatastrophe because the capacity of the earth to buffer the effects of human production has become overwhelmed by the chaos of its productive system. Any movement for social transformation in our time will have to foreground this issue, for the very notion of a future depends on whether we can resolve it or not.

For this reason, a socialism worthy of the name will have to be ecologically—or to be more exact, "ecocentrically"—oriented, that is, will have to be an "ecosocialism" devoted to restoring the integrity of our relationship to nature. The distinction between ecosocialism and the "first-epoch" socialisms of the last century is not merely terminological, as though for ecosocialism we simply need worker control over the industrial apparatus and some good environmental regulation. We do need worker control in ecosocialism as we did in the socialism of the "first epoch," for unless the producers are free there is no overcoming of capitalism. But the ecological aspect also poses a new and more radical issue that calls into question the very character of production itself.

Capitalist production is that mode which, in its endless search for profit, seeks to turn everything into a commodity. Only in this way can accumulation continuously expand. By releasing us from the tyranny of private ownership of the means of production, socialism, whether of the first-epoch variety or as ecosocialism, makes it possible to interrupt the deadly tendency of cancerous growth, which is effectively driven by the competition between capitals for ever greater market share. But this leaves open the question of just what will be produced, and how, within an ecosocialist society.

It is plain that production will have to shift from being dominated by exchange—the path of the commodity—to that which is for use, that is for the direct meeting of human needs. But this in turn requires definition; and in the context of ecological crisis, "use" can only mean those set of needs essential for the overcoming of the ecological crisis—for this is the greatest

need for civilization as a whole, and therefore for each woman and man within it.

It follows that human beings can only flourish in circumstances in which the damage to nature that capital has wrought is overcome, as for example, by ceasing to transfer carbon to the atmosphere. Since "nature" is the interrelated set of all ecosystems, production within ecosocialism is to be oriented toward the mending of ecosystemic damage and indeed, the making of flourishing ecosystems, whether these be ecologically rational farms, or—since we ourselves are natural creatures who live ecosystemically, in communities—ecologically directed human relationships, including the raising of children, the relations between genders and indeed, the whole spiritual and aesthetic side of life.

This article is far too brief to allow the development of these themes. But from what has been said so far it should be apparent that in talking of ecosocialism we are saying much more than that our economy or technology must change. Ecosocialism is no more a purely economic matter than was socialism or communism in the eyes of Marx. It needs to be precisely the radical transformation of society—and human existence—that Marx envisioned as the next stage in human evolution—and must be that if we are going to survive the ecological crisis. Ecosocialism is the ushering in, then, of a whole *mode of production*, one in which freely associated labor produces flourishing ecosystems rather than commodities.

Most definitely, this raises far more questions than it answers: that is, simply, a measure of how profound the ecological crisis is. What, after all, would life look like if we stopped pouring carbon into the atmosphere and allowed the climate ecosystem to re-equilibrate, that is, be healed? How, really, are we to live fully human lives in harmony with nature given the tremendous horrors built into our system of society? There is no certainty of outcome. But there is one certainty we have to build: *There must be an alternative.*