

Eco-Socialism

Why we need Eco-socialism

Derek Wall

In his presentation to the Socialist Resistance 'Ecosocialism or Barbarism' day school Dr. Derek Wall, the Male Principal Speaker of the Green Party of England and Wales argued for a re-reading of Marx to develop ecosocialist principles, for the alternative is literally unthinkable destruction. Derek Wall is a life long ecosocialist and founder of the GPEW socialist group Green Left. [[1](#)]

I would like to thank you for endorsing **Joel Kovel** and **Michael Lowy's *Ecosocialist Manifesto*** : [[2](#)] it is an essential document because it argues that unlimited economic growth is unsustainable, while capitalism to survive must grow for ever. It calls for an alternative to this system of madness. Support for the Ecosocialist manifesto is therefore vital.

In a passage from *Capital: Volume One*, which is important for its understanding of how we can create a sustainable future, Marx links the open source principle to socialism and use - we should take what we want but nurture what we use for the benefit of the next generation:

From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuries, and like boni patres familias, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition. [[3](#)]

The madness of capitalism

The madness of capitalism is exemplified by the fact that the five members of the Walmart family enjoy an annual income of \$120 billion while many starve. At the start of the industrial

era, there were 220 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and now there are 450ppm and I believe that CO2 will stabilise at something like 700ppm with disastrous result.

The Blair government is planning to spend £20bn on the Trident nuclear programme. Iraq, far from being the exception, is part of a process of continual intervention: at the behest of the United Fruit Company, worried about land reform and tax threats to their activities in Guatemala, the CIA organised a coup which helped to radicalise a young medic known as Che Guevara. The Ecosocialist Manifesto helps make the connection between all these events.

Theory and practice

I joined the **Ecology Party** in 1980, which later became the Green Party of England and Wales. Opposition to ever increasing economic growth is pretty much the alpha and omega of my politics. The rather Malthusian Ecology Party made the important point that economic growth could not continue for ever without creating serious ecological problems. It was weaker at explaining why capitalism, 'almost like a system of secular religion' was so obsessed with economic accumulation. Malthus incidentally was no green and Malthusian politics must be transcended.

I think the first author to make me think about Marxism and ecology was Andre Gorz in his book *Ecology as Politics*, which made the obvious point that capitalism cannot survive without perpetual blind growth. Rudolf Bahro, before his retreat into religion, was also important; and, of course, **Alan Roberts' *The Self-Managing Environment***. Of the many books I have read on the connections between reds and greens, I would recommend John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* and Joel Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature*.

I was particularly inspired by Joel Kovel because we ecosocialists can be bookish, we don't always get involved in the world of real practical politics. In fact, since the great William Morris died in 1896, ecosocialism has been rather marginalized. What impressed me and inspired me was the fact that Kovel stood in 2000 for the US Green Party presidential nomination against Ralph Nader. It was not that he was particularly antagonistic to Nader but he wanted to stand against him to make Nader's politics redder and greener. I thought this was great and I stood against Green Party MEP Caroline Lucas for a place on the Green MEP list, in the same spirit of encouraging her to be more radical. That said, while Caroline does not use the term

ecosocialist, there is little to fault about her politics. I found when I was on the Euro list that the big task was not radicalising her but making sure that she was re-elected as MEP in 2004. I stood as Green Party Male Principal Speaker and I am glad to say that I was elected in the ballot, beating the incumbent Keith Taylor.

I would like to recommend that you all read Joel Kovel's book. It is the most sophisticated account of ecosocialism that I know. Ecosocialism starts with the notion, taken from Marx, that respect for the rest of nature means a radical form of humanism. Marx took Feuerbach's notion of fetishism to describe such radical humanism. Feuerbach famously argued that human beings invent gods and goddesses, forget they have invented them and bow down to worship their own creations. Marx reminds us that human beings, through social action, create the economic system; we then forget that the economy is a human construct and worship it as if it were a god. Ecological sanity can only come when we recognise that the present economic system of capitalism is a social construct that must be overthrown. While Marxists and the rest of the left during the 20th century have had little to say about the environment, I find Marx a very modern writer with much to say about how humanity can prosper without wrecking the environment.

Marx and ecology

Marx had four ideas that I find essential, which are also dealt with implicitly or explicitly in *The Enemy of Nature*

. The first, identified in Chapter One of *Capital: Volume One*

, is the notion of use value as opposed to exchange value. A capitalist economy is focused on exchange values - we could increase use value by making goods that last longer, by extending the library principle to all kinds of goods. Even in a market-based society, car pools exist. Real prosperity means that we have access to useful things; it is quite different from wasteful increases in Gross National Product (GNP).

The second key idea is materialism. Materialism in the best sense means valuing the real solid material world, having sensual appreciation of the world we live in. The slow food movement is part of this: it does not mean wearing 'hair shirts', but greater qualitative enjoyment of the food and other resources we have.

The third is opposition to enclosure. Under capitalism resources that are free - from land to ideas - are essentially stolen, fenced in and sold back to us. This increases exchange value (GNP) but makes us poorer. Some of Marx's earliest political writings examined the imposition of laws that prevented peasants from gathering fallen wood in German forests. The open source principle of free access and creativity is an example of how enclosure can and should be fought.

The fourth is the notion of struggle. A society controlled by the few must be replaced by one that works for all. The enclosure and commodification of labour is the most important form of enclosure. The existence and success of mutuals and cooperatives owned by workers, even within a market-based capitalist society, shows that an alternative without capitalism is not only necessary but possible.

Shifting the burden onto the poor

We must in short overcome a society based on blind accumulation. Growth sounds good but access to resources is very different to a system based on waste. Environmental solutions that rely on the market, as proposed by the ***Stern Report*** seeking to simply tax pollution, are not enough. It is worrying that Stern sees climate change as an opportunity for the City of London to gain financially. Simply taxing environmental problems or creating markets for tradable pollution permits will shift the burden on to the poorest in society, letting those with wealth and power continue to pollute. In Britain, it looks like congestion charges will be rolled out across the whole country to encourage us to drive less, but rail fares, including those regulated by a government body, are rising by more than inflation to pay for investment. Citizens are going to be priced out of their cars and off trains as well. There is a danger of energy apartheid.

In 1884, the great eco-socialist William Morris was active with Engels and Eleanor Marx in the Social Democratic Federation, Britain's first socialist political party. Their membership card was inscribed with the slogan 'Educate, agitate, organise'. We must do the same to make eco-socialism hegemonic; it's great to see socialists embracing eco-socialism and greens, at least in the Green Party of England and Wales and the USA Green Party, embracing a politics of social justice. The alternative to eco-socialism is literally unthinkable destruction.

- *Derek Wall is the Male Principal Speaker of the Green Party of England and Wales, a life long ecosocialist and founder of the GPEW socialist group Green Left.*

NOTES

[1] His most recent book, *Babylon and Beyond: the Economics of Anti-Globalist, Anti-Capitalist and Radical Green Movements*, was published by Pluto.

[2] Republished in Jane Kelly & Sheila Malone (eds), *Ecosocialism or Barbarism*, Socialist Resistance, 2006, pp116-120.

[3] Marx quoted in Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, 2002, p 238.