

Murray Bookchin, Excerpts from *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 2006

What is Social Ecology?

Social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems. It follows, from this view, that these ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today – apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes.

If this approach seems a bit too sociological for those environmentalists who identify the primary ecological problem as being the preservation of wildlife or wilderness, or more broadly as attending to “Gaia” to achieve planetary “oneness,” they might wish to consider certain recent developments. The massive oil spills that have occurred over the past two decades, the extensive deforestation of tropical forest and magnificent ancient trees in temperate areas, and vast hydroelectric projects that flood places where people live, to cite only a few problems, are sobering reminders that the real battleground on which the ecological future of the planet will be decided is clearly a social one, particularly between corporate power and the long-range interests of humanity as a whole.

Indeed, to separate ecological problems from social problems – or even to play down or give only token recognition to their crucial relationship – would be to grossly misconstrue the sources of the growing environmental crisis. In effect, the way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to addressing the ecological crisis. Unless we clearly recognize this, we will fail to see that the hierarchical mentality and class relationships that so thoroughly permeate society are what has given rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world.

Unless we realize that the present market society, structured around the brutally competitive imperative of “grow or die,” is a thoroughly impersonal, self-operating mechanism, we will falsely tend to blame other phenomena – such as technology or population growth – for growing environmental dislocations. We will ignore their root causes, such as trade for profit, industrial expansion for its own sake, and the identification of progress with corporate self-interest. In short, we will tend to focus on the symptoms of a grim social pathology rather than on the pathology itself, and our efforts will be directed toward limited goals whose attainment is more cosmetic than curative.

First and second nature

Social ecology calls upon us to see that the natural world and the social are interlinked by evolution into one nature that consists of two differentiations: first or biotic nature, and second

or social nature. Social nature and biotic nature share an evolutionary potential for greater subjectivity and flexibility. Second nature is the way in which human beings, as flexible, highly intelligent primates, inhabit and alter the natural world. That is to say, people create an environment that is most suitable for their mode of existence. In this respect, second nature is no different from the environment that every animal, depending upon its abilities, partially creates as well as primarily adapts to – the biophysical circumstances or eco-community in which it must live. In principle, on this very simple level, human beings are doing nothing that differs from the survival activities of nonhuman beings, be it building beaver dams or digging gopher holes.

But the environmental changes that human beings produce are profoundly different from those produced by nonhuman beings. Humans act upon their environments with considerable technical foresight, however lacking that foresight may be in ecological ideals. Animals adapt to the world around them; human beings innovate through thought and social labor. For better or worse, they alter the natural world to meet their needs and desires – not because they are perverse, but because they have evolved quite naturally over the ages to do so. Their cultures are rich in knowledge, experience, cooperation, and conceptual intellectuality; however, they have been sharply divided against themselves at many points of their development, through conflicts between groups, classes, nation-states, and even city-states.

Nonhuman beings generally live in ecological niches, their behavior guided primarily by instinctive drives and conditioned reflexes. Human societies are “bonded” together by institutions that change radically over centuries. Nonhuman communities are notable for their general fixity, by their clearly preset, often genetically imprinted rhythms. Human communities are guided in part by ideological factors and are subject to changes conditioned by those factors. Nonhuman communities are generally tied together by genetically rooted instinctive factors – to the extent that these communities exist at all.

Hence human beings, emerging from an organic evolutionary process, initiate, by the sheer force of their biological and survival needs, a social evolutionary development that clearly involves their organic evolutionary process. Owing to their naturally endowed intelligence, powers of communication, capacity for institutional organization, and relative freedom from instinctive behavior, they refashion their environment – as do non-human beings – to the full extent that their biological equipment allows.

This equipment makes it possible for them to engage not only in social life but in social development. It is not so much that human beings, in principle, behave differently from animals or are inherently more problematical in a strictly ecological sense, as it is that the social development by which they grade out of their biological development often becomes more problematical for themselves and non-human life. How these problems emerge, the ideologies they produce, the extent to which they contribute to biotic evolution or abort it, and the damage they inflict on the planet as a whole lie at the very heart of the modern ecological crisis.

Second nature as it exists today, far from marking the fulfillment of human potentialities, is riddled by contradictions, antagonisms, and conflicting interests that have distorted humanity's unique capacities for development. Its future prospects encompass both the danger of tearing down the biosphere and alas, given the struggle to achieve an ecological society, the capacity to provide an entirely new ecological dispensation.

The Idea of Dominating Nature

Nature, in the sense of the biotic environment from which humans take the simple things they need for survival, often has no meaning to preliterate peoples as a general concept. Immersed in it as they are, even celebrating animistic rituals in an environment they view as a nexus of life, often imputing their own social institutions to the behavior of nonhuman species, as in the case of beaver "lodges" and humanlike spirits, the concept of "nature" as such eludes them.

Words that express our conventional notions of nature are not easy to find, if they exist at all, in the languages of aboriginal peoples. With the rise of hierarchy and domination, however, the seeds were planted for the belief that first nature not only exists as a world that is increasingly distinguishable from the community but one that is hierarchically organized and can be dominated by human beings.

We must emphasize here that the idea of dominating nature has its primary source in the domination of human by human and in the structuring of the natural world into a hierarchical chain of being. The biblical injunction that gave command of the living world to Adam and Noah was above all an expression of a social dispensation.

Its idea of dominating nature – so essential to the view of the non-human world as an object of domination – can be overcome only through the creation of a society without those class and hierarchical structures that make for rule and obedience in private as well as public life, and the objectifications of reality as mere materials for exploitation. Until human beings cease to live in societies that are structured around hierarchies as well as economic classes, we shall never be free of domination, however much we try to dispel it with rituals, incantations, eco-theologies, and the adoption of seemingly "natural" lifeways.

The idea of dominating nature has a history that is almost as old as that of hierarchy itself. Long before the emergence of modern science, "linear" rationality, and "industrial society" (to cite causal factors that are invoked so flippantly in the modern ecology movement), hierarchical and class societies laid waste to much of the Mediterranean basin as well as the hillsides of China, beginning a vast remaking and often despoliation of the planet.

To be sure, human second nature, in inflicting harm on first nature, created no Garden of Eden. More often than not, it despoiled much that was beautiful, creative, and dynamic in the biotic world, just as it ravaged human life itself in murderous warfare, genocide, and acts of heartless oppression. Social ecology maintains that the future of human life goes hand in hand with the future of the nonhuman world, yet it does not overlook the fact that the harm that hierarchical

and class society inflicted on the natural world was more than matched by the harm it inflicted on much of humanity.

An Ecological Society

Social ecology is an appeal not only for moral regeneration but, and above all, for social reconstruction along ecological lines. It emphasizes that, taken by itself, an ethical appeal to the powers that be, based on blind market forces and ruthless competition, is certain to be futile. Indeed, taken by itself, such an appeal obscures the real power relationships that prevail today by making the attainment of an ecological society seem merely a matter of changing individual attitudes, spiritual renewal, or quasi-religious redemption.

Social ecology, in effect, recognizes that – like it or not – the future of life on this planet pivots on the future of society. It contends that evolution, both in first nature and in second, is not yet complete. Nor are the two realms so separated from each other that we must choose one or the other – either natural evolution, with its “biocentric” halo, or social evolution, as we have known it up to now, with its “anthropocentric” halo – as the basis for a creative biosphere. We must go beyond both the natural and the social toward a new synthesis that contains the best of both. Such a synthesis must transcend both first and second nature in the form of a creative, self-conscious, and therefore “free nature,” in which human beings intervene in natural evolution with their best capacities – their ethical sense, their unequalled capacity for conceptual thought, and their remarkable powers and range of communication.

But no ethics or vision of an ecological society, however inspired, can be meaningful unless it is embodied in a living politics. By *politics*, I do not mean the statecraft practiced by what we call politicians – namely, representatives elected or selected to manage public affairs and formulate policies as guidelines for social life. To social ecology, politics means what it meant in the democratic polis of classical Athens some two thousand years ago: direct democracy, the formulation of policies by directly democratic popular assemblies, and the administration of those policies by mandated coordinators who can easily be recalled if they fail to abide by the decision of the assembly’s citizens.

I am very mindful that Athenian politics, even in its most democratic periods, was marred by the existence of slavery and patriarchy, and by the exclusion of the stranger from public life. In this respect, to be sure, it differed very little from most of the other ancient Mediterranean civilizations – and certainly ancient Asian ones – of the time. What made Athenian politics unique, however, was that it produced institutions that were extraordinarily democratic – even directly so – by comparison with the republican institutions of the so-called “democracies” of today’s world. Either directly or indirectly, the Athenian democracy inspired later, more all-encompassing direct democracies, such as many medieval European towns, the little-known Parisian “sections” (or neighborhood assemblies) of 1793 that propelled the French Revolution in a highly radical direction, and more indirectly, New England town meetings, and other, more recent attempts at civic self-governance.

Any self-managed community, however, that tries to live in isolation and develop self-sufficiency risks the danger of becoming parochial, even racist. Hence the need to extend the ecological politics of a direct democracy into confederations of ecocommunities, and to foster a healthy interdependence, rather than an introverted, stultifying independence. Social ecology would be obliged to embody its ethics in a politics of libertarian municipalism, in which municipalities conjointly gain rights to self-governance through networks of confederal councils, to which towns and cities would be expected to send their mandated, recallable delegates to adjust differences. All decisions would have to be ratified by a majority of the popular assemblies of the confederated towns and cities. This institutional process could be initiated in the neighborhoods of giant cities as well as in networks of small towns. In fact, the formation of numerous “town halls” has already repeatedly been proposed in cities as large as New York and Paris, only to be defeated by well-organized elitist groups that sought to centralize power rather than allow its decentralization.

Power will always belong to elite and commanding strata if it is not institutionalized in face-to-face democracies, among people who are fully empowered as social beings to make decisions in new communal assemblies. Attempts to empower people in this manner and form constitute an abiding challenge to the nation-state – that is, a dual power in which the free municipality exists in open tension with the nation-state. Power that does not belong to the people invariably belongs to the state and the exploitative interests it represents.

Should the full reality of citizenship in all its discursiveness and political vitality begin to wane, its disappearance would mark an unprecedented loss in human development. Citizenship, in the classical sense of the term, which involved a lifelong, ethically oriented education in the art of participation in public affairs (not the empty form of national legitimation that it so often consists of today), would disappear. Its loss would mean the atrophying of a communal life beyond the limits of the family, the waning of a civic sensibility to the point of the shriveled ego, the complete replacement of the public arena with the private world and with private pursuits.

The failure of a rational, socially committed ecology movement would yield a mechanized, aesthetically arid, and administered society, composed of vacuous egos at best and totalitarian automata at worst. Before the planet was rendered physically uninhabitable, there would be few humans who would be able to inhabit it.

Alternatively, a truly ecological society would open the vista of a “free nature” with a sophisticated eco-technology based on solar, wind, and water; carefully treated fossil fuels would be sited to produce power to meet rationally conceived needs. Production would occur entirely for use, not for profit, and the distribution of goods would occur entirely to meet human needs based on norms established by citizens’ assemblies and confederations of assemblies. Decisions by the community would be made according to direct, face-to-face procedures with all the coordinative judgments mandated delegates. These judgments, in turn, would be referred back for discussion, approval, modification, or rejection by the assembly of assemblies (or Commune of communes) as a whole, reflecting the wishes of the fully assembled majority.

We cannot tell how much technology will be expanded a few decades from now, let alone a few generations. Its growth and the prospects it is likely to open over the course of this century alone are too dazzling even for the most imaginative utopian to envision. If nothing else, we have been swept into a permanent technological and communications revolution whose culmination it is impossible to foresee. This amassing of power and knowledge opens two radically opposing prospects: either humanity will truly destroy itself and its habitat, or it will create a garden, a fruitful and benign world that not even the most fanciful utopian, Charles Fourier, could have imagined.

It is fitting that such dire alternatives should appear now and in such extreme forms. Unless social ecology – with its naturalistic outlook, its developmental interpretations of natural and social phenomena, its emphasis on discipline with freedom and responsibility with imagination – can be brought to the service of such historic ends, humanity may well prove to be incapable of changing the world. We cannot defer the need to deal with these prospects indefinitely: either a movement will arise that will bestir humanity into action, or the last great chance in history for the complete emancipation of humanity will perish in unrestrained self-destruction.