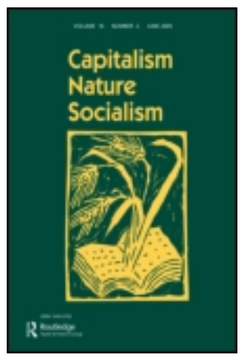

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society. Radical democracy may equalize formal rights of citizenship and equal participation in decision-making structures, but it does not in-and-of itself eliminate differentiated class interests and tensions. True "social governance of the means of production" and long-term democratic environmental planning based on human need requires social ownership over key sectors of the economy. In this sense, the ideals of socialism are integral to the construction of a viable radical democracy, even though socialism does not guarantee the realization of these democratic-ecological ideals. Class interests under socialism must come to be represented via a variety of mechanisms, movements, and institutions. Radical socialist democracy should insure that those who labor inside the factory, those who reside in households and communities outside the factory, and those who consume the products produced by the factory, all share in the economic planning process and administration of society. In this regard, a socialist pluralism would imply a broadening of traditional conceptions of class to include other issues of power and oppression as presented by political ecology, the women's movement, civil and human rights, consumer product safety advocates, and other social movements of a genuine civil society.

If We Had a Theory of Political Ecology, What Would it Look Like?

By Frank Ackerman

"Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism," is evocative and thought provoking for those who share the intellectual history of migration from Marxist social movements to ecological circles. The similarities between the two worlds, in their critical stance toward existing society and in their progressive political orientation, are striking. In my own experience as a dissident economist I found there to be a remarkable parallel in spirit, and sometimes in substance, between the early days of the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) in the 1970s and the first years of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) in the early 1990s.

Lipietz takes us a long way toward understanding the theoretical basis for the similarities between Marxism and political ecology, as movements and as ideologies. I will not dwell on the numerous points on which I agree with him. Yet at the end of his essay, I was looking

for something more. The beginning of the essay persuaded me that rather than focusing again on the successes and failures of Marxism (as he does in later sections), we should be attempting to create a comparable theory of political ecology. That theory might use the same tools and concepts when appropriate, but would look fundamentally new and different.

To that end, it is important to examine the areas in which a theory of political ecology will require new departures. I want to consider four such areas, inspired by a reading of Lipietz: the theory of value; the theory of crises; the analysis of social movements and political change; and the vision of an ideal society.

1. Labor, Lumber, and Scarcity: Marxism has a unitary theory of value, based on labor, which is seamlessly connected to the analysis of historical dynamics, the role of the working class as the leading agent of change, and the vision, however sketchy it remains, of an ideal, post-capitalist society. A single source of value leads to a single fulcrum for historical change and political action, and to an inspirational vision of the future.

Political ecology presumably still accepts the notion that labor is an important source of value, but no longer the sole source. Lipietz notes that society may add eco-taxes to the price of commodities, reflecting social concern for other values, but this is only the surface manifestation of a deeper point. A focus on ecology identifies at least two radically un-Marxian sources of value in the natural world. First, the biological growth of renewable resources, like the reproduction of labor power, creates new (ecological and economic) value in excess of its cost of production. By analogy with Marxism, this leads to what could be called as the "lumber theory of value."[1] If and when there is a transition to a sustainable economy, renewable resources of biological origin will become of increasing importance as sources of materials and energy.

Second, there are vital resources that are available only in fixed supply, such as nonrenewable mineral and fossil fuel resources, or the absorptive capacity of the atmosphere, oceans, and other ecosystems. As Herman Daly and others have pointed out, this gives rise to a definite, fixed scale which production (and population) cannot sustainably exceed, a limitation which is equally alien to Marxist and bourgeois economic traditions. In fact, ecological limits create

[1]This is discussed briefly in Frank Ackerman, "The Natural Interest Rate of the Forest," *Ecological Economics*, May, 1994.

problems of relative scarcity, the one category of problems which conventional economics elevates above all others. As in textbook stories, those resources that are scarcest, relative to demand, must be considered to be most valuable. However, the scarcities of the natural environment, and the "shadow prices" that might reflect them, are a far cry from the scarcities of the market and the actual prices of a capitalist economy.

We now have at least three distinct sources of value for a theory of political ecology: labor, as in Marxist theory; the growth of renewable resources; and the natural limits of scarce nonrenewable resources and fixed carrying capacity. This is a more realistic, yet more diffuse and eclectic theory, compared with the powerful, unified analysis of classical Marxism.

2. The Varieties of Crisis: In Marxism the theory of value and the analysis of historical dynamics led to a theory of capitalist crisis. Here the resonance with ecological theory may be greatest, as the threat of environmental crisis has played a major role in the rise of environmental consciousness and activism. As Lipietz notes, the two schools of thought rely on quite different models of social dynamics. Nonetheless, the tone of the theories, the moral power of the call to action, is similar. Business as usual will lead inexorably to crisis, both theories tell us; only through protracted, organized political struggle can it be averted. This familiar refrain is, I suspect, a large part of why so many Marxist veterans feel at home in ecological circles.

Yet in comparison to Marxism, the projection of ecological crisis is multi-faceted and diffuse. The elaborate Marxist analyses of crisis often led to scholarly and partisan debate; many variants of Marxist crisis theory have not withstood the test of time. Nonetheless, there was a relatively unified theoretical framework from which such theories emerged.

Ecological crisis, in contrast, is a broad range of technologically driven disaster stories, available with many different villains and plot lines. One well-known story involves local toxic waste and pollution crises, on the Love Canal model. Another centers on the loss of biodiversity and the extinction of species. A third concerns global warming and the threat of adverse climate change. Can we say anything useful about the common causes and characteristics of these three modes of crisis? They appear to be connected only at a very high level of abstraction — perhaps reflecting the more eclectic theoretical basis for political ecology. Moreover, the stories of ecological crisis cannot entirely be subsumed into a neo-Marxist analysis of capitalist crisis;

local ecological devastation is all too compatible with profitable capitalist expansion.

3. Movement Without Class, Practice Without Theory: There is no doubt in Marxist theory about the primary agency for change, nor about the source of the potential power and consciousness of the working class. Recent events have, alas, been less than kind to this theory of political change. Lipietz explores some of the possible reasons for the failure of the Marxist analysis of the working class; in this discussion I think his thinking may remain too tightly connected to recent Western European experience.

A more serious problem is that his discussion is too little connected to the analysis of environmental movements. If we are to create a theory of political ecology analogous to Marxism, we need to answer a different question: who are all those green activists and where do they come from? The environmental movement is as successful as any progressive effort of recent years, yet we have no comprehensive theory about why this has happened and who has become involved.

The environmental movement is not a class-based phenomenon in any simple terms. Nor is it always based on any other readily identifiable category of self-interest. Of the three examples of ecological crisis introduced above, only the first, involving local toxic waste and pollution impacts, is likely to lead to responses by those most directly and personally affected. In the other two examples, the loss of biodiversity is often remote in space (in exotic, far-away locales), and the most serious damages from climate change are remote in time (far in the future), from those who are protesting today.

Local responses to immediate crises of toxicity or other obvious local impacts are an important part of environmental politics, but are far from telling the whole story. Another important part of the environmental movement consists of successful mobilization around issues that are entirely outside the personal experience of the activists. A subtle theory of political motivation and action will be required to comprehend the breadth of modern environmentalism.

4. Two Utopias, or One? The big difference between Marxism and political ecology, for Lipietz, lies in their ultimate objectives, since ecology cannot endorse the goal of expanding production and incomes. Despite all the similarities, are these two schools of thought advocating two incompatible utopias? Or are the hopeful advocates of sustainable development and red-green alliances correct in their belief that they can be reconciled? Is the Marxist image of increasing mastery over nature necessarily at odds with the ecological vision of harmony with nature,

or can we have just enough of each to get by? To aid the search for a final answer, I offer three comments, concerning wealth, poverty, and ecological limits.

First, it is a misstatement of the objectives of Marxism to suggest that expanded production and income is always desirable. The vision of an ideal communist society is one in which all are freed from material necessity; this is a picture of sufficiency, not of endless acquisition. A substantial and growing fraction of the population of the U.S. and other developed countries already have more than enough material goods. They are lacking, to varying degrees, in such social goals as economic security, unalienated work, public services, a clean environment, and meaningful participation in community and political life. In fact, the pursuit of ever greater personal consumption is in part an imperfect substitute for the satisfaction of these social needs. The Marxist vision involves adequate income and private consumption for all — and it involves better ways of satisfying social needs, in an unalienated, empowering, democratic economy and society. To cite one ecologically important example, it is inconceivable that the per capita resources spent on transportation in a rational society could approach current North American levels.

Second, there are vast numbers of people in developing countries — and significant minorities in even the richest countries — for whom more income and consumption would be needed under any social arrangements. A certain level of mastery over nature is, in fact, exactly what is needed by the poor. This is true not only of basic needs such as food, shelter, and health care, but also of a somewhat higher level of material consumption, a fact which poses a potential environmental dilemma. After all, affluence uses materials and creates waste; in contrast, the poor generate very little waste per capita. The historian Susan Strasser has chronicled the use, reuse, and recycling of material goods in 19th and early 20th century American households. Since money incomes were low and material prices were high, everything was painstakingly repaired, mended, and reused.[2] The result was both ecologically beneficial and personally exhausting.

The freedom to take commodities for granted, to spend less household labor on conserving and reusing materials, is much of what makes a person feel affluent. From 1830 to 1960 the labor time required for the average urban American worker to buy common material goods

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[2]Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: Disposal, Recycling, and American Consumer Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999).

fell by a factor of 10 or more, and the exhausting 19th-century reverence for materials died out.[3]

Finally, it is necessary to deal with the ecological constraints on a future society. There is a fixed scale of material and energy use, beyond which the global economy cannot sustainably expand. What standard of living could be provided for all on an equitable and sustainable basis? The answer to this question will ultimately determine the compatibility of the Marxist and ecological future visions. Remarkably, this is in part a researchable, empirical question, about which much more could be learned. The level at which the world population stabilizes plays a major role; current demographic projections give grounds for cautious optimism, as birth rates have dropped sharply in almost all regions. Maximizing the productivity of renewable resources and minimizing use of nonrenewable resources will be important, with abundant opportunities for the further development of green technology.

The bottom line is, what will an equitable, sustainable world feel like? It is neither possible nor desirable for the whole world to live like Americans in the 1990s. Might it be possible for eight to 10 billion people to live as Western Europeans lived in the 1970s? Or will a lower level of consumption, with more of the exhausting 19th-century reverence for materials, be required? Our hopes and our political theories take us only so far, to the (essential) starting point of commitment to building an equitable and sustainable world. Beyond that starting point lies a crucial, unanswered economic and environmental question: how comfortable will sustainability be?

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[3]Frank Ackerman, *Why Do We Recycle? Markets, Values, and Public Policy* (Washington: Island Press, 1997), Chapter 10 (a graph of labor time required to buy common materials appears on p. 181).