Ecology and Revolutionary Thought

Murray Bookchin

1970

Broadly conceived, ecology deals with a balance in nature. Inasmuch as nature includes man, the science basically deals with the harmonization of man and nature. Ecology is an integrative and reconstructed science in that it deals with the most radical systems of political economy.

This intrinsic characteristic of ecology, carried through to all its implications, leads directly into anarchic areas of political and economic thought.

For in the final analysis it is impossible to achieve a harmonization of man and nature without creating a human community that lives in a lasting balance with its natural environment.

Basically why ecology has become, in the last year, a pressing political problem is the very subject matter it, as a science, is concerned with. Its issues are imperishable in the sense that they cannot be ignored without bringing to question the viability of the planet, the very survival of man himself. Ecology's critical edge is due most probably to the sovereignty of nature over man and all his activities.

It may be that man is able to manipulate his surroundings as the engineers demonstrate with their shiny achievements. And it may also be true that man is manipulable, as proven by the success of advertising in deluging the human market with deadly commodities. But ecology clearly shows that the totality of the natural world, nature taken in all its aspects, cycles, and interrelationships, cancels out all human pretensions of mastery over the world.

The great wastelands of North Africa and the eroded hills of Greece, once areas of a thriving agriculture, or a rich natural flora, are historic evidences of nature's revenge against human parasitism, be it in the form of soil exploitation or defoliation.

Yet these examples do not compare in intensity and scope with the effects of man's despoliation—and nature's revenge—since the days of the Industrial Revolution and especially since the end of the Second World War. Like imperialism, man's destruction of the planet is global in scope.

It is even extra-terrestrial as demonstrated by the recent disturbances of the Van Allen Belt caused by explosions of thousands of nuclear devices. Human parasitism disrupts not only the atmosphere, climate, water resources, soil, flora and fauna of local regions, but the very cycles of nature, which in turn threaten the stability of the human environment on a world-wide basis.

To demonstrate the depths of man's exploitative behavior, it could be argued on a very sound theoretical basis, that man is flooding his planet. The mounting blanket of carbon dioxide intercepts heat radiated from the earth and sent into outer space. This leads to more violent circulation of air currents, causing more destructive storm patterns, and eventually, within the next two or three centuries, will lead to the melting of the polar ice caps. This, of course, would cause rising sea levels that would inundate vast land areas.

A more recent and apparent ecological issue is man's pollution of the earth's waterways. Nearly all the waters of the United States are polluted. Many American waterways are open cesspools that properly qualify as extensions of urban sewage systems. It would be euphemistic to still regard them as streams or rivers:

More significantly, large portions of groundwater are sufficiently polluted to be undrinkable, even medically hazardous. Various cases of hepatitis epidemics have been traced to polluted wells in suburban areas.

In contrast to surface-water pollution, groundwater, or sub-surface pollution, is immensely difficult to eliminate and tends to linger on for decades, even after the sources of pollution have been removed. It suffices to point out, especially in light of recent events, that the discharge of diesel-oil wastes, accidentally or consciously, from ships in the Atlantic and petroleum dredging facilities has become a massive pollution problem, claiming enormous numbers of marine life every year.

Man's destructive parasitism, unbalanced by any positive contributions, raises profoundly important questions. What are the conditions that have turned man into a highly-destructive parasite? What produces a form of human parasitism that results in not only vast natural imbalances but threatens the very existence of humanity itself?

The truth of the matter is that man has created these imbalances in nature as a direct outgrowth of the imbalances he has created in his own society.

From a historical standpoint, it would have been possible a century ago to attribute air and water contamination to the activities of greedy and profit seeking industrial barons and self-seeking bureaucrats. Today this explanation would be a gross over-simplification.

In order for the modern capitalist state to operate effectively the social order must be vastly regimented, organized and strategically placed within immediate reach of the peaks of production. Huge urban belts now developing in industrial societies of the world are not only grossly offensive to the eye but they are becoming chronically smog-ridden, noisy, and virtually immobilized by congestion.

The modern city represents a regressive encroachment on the natural, of the inorganic (concrete, metals, steel and glass) on the organic. From the standpoint of the ecologist, man is dangerously simplifying his environment.

The need to manipulate immense urban populations in regard to food, clothing, housing, education and transportation presents a serious decline in social existence.

The previous individual dimensions of man are exchanged in an industrial society for centralism, totalitarianism, bureaucracy and regimentation. Bureaucratic techniques of manipulating populations have tended to replace humanistic approaches.

All that is creative, spontaneous and individualistic in man is subjected to standardization and regularization. Human relations are narrowly restricted by a nameless, faceless social apparatus.

The mass-society, with its statistical beehive approach, tends to triumph over free-expression, personal uniqueness and cultural complexity. This creates a crisis not only in natural ecology but in social ecology.

The simplification process is carried still further by an exaggerated regional, in fact a national, division' of labor. Immense areas of the planet are increasingly reserved for specific industrial tasks or reduced to depots of raw materials. Others are turned into centers of urban population, largely occupied with commerce and trade.

Cities and regions, in fact countries and continents, are specifically identified with specific products—Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Youngstown with steel, New York with finance, Bolivia with tin, Arabia with oil, Europe and America with industrial goods and the rest of the world with raw materials of one kind or another.

The complex ecological systems which make up the characteristics of individual regions are submerged. This is done so that entire nations can be organized into economically rationalized entities. Each is a way-station in an industrial system that is global in dimensions.

The point is that man is literally undoing the work of organic evolution.

By creating vast urban agglomerations of concrete, metal and glass, by overriding and undermining the complex, subtly organized ecosystems that constitute local differences in the natural world, by replacing a highly complex organic environment with a simplified inorganic one, man is disassembling the biotic pyramid that supported humanity for countless millennia.

In the course of exchanging complex ecological relationships, on which all advanced living things depend, for more elementary relationships, man is methodically turning back the environment, the biosphere, to a stage which will be able to support only simpler forms of life.

If this great reversal of the evolutionary process continues, it is by no means invalid to suppose that the preconditions for higher forms of life will be irreparably destroyed, and the earth will be incapable of supporting man.

From an ecological view, the reversal of the organic evolution is the result of appalling contradictions between town and country, city and community, industry and husbandry, mass manufacture and craftsmanship, the bureaucratic scale and the human scale.

Until recently, attempts to resolve the contradictions created by urbanization, centralization, bureaucratic growth and stratification were viewed as a vain counterdrift to "progress."

The anarchist was viewed as a forlorn visionary, a social outcast, filled with nostalgia for the peasant village of the medieval commune. His yearning for a decentralized society, a humanized community at one with nature and the needs of the individual, spontaneous and unfettered by authority, were regarded as reactions of an unclassed craftsman, or an intellectual misfit.

His protest against centralization and stratification seemed all the less persuasive because it was primarily supported by ethical considerations, by utopian "unrealistic" notions of man.

To this protest, opponents of anarchist thought—liberals, rightists and authoritarian leftists—argued that they were the voices of historical reality, that their statist, centralist and political notions were rooted in the objective, practical world.

The modern city and state, the massive coal-steel technology of the Industrial Revolution, the later, more rationalized systems of mass production and the assembly line system of labor organization, the centralized state, the nation and its bureaucratic apparatus, all have reached their limits.

They not only belong to man's visions of the future but they remain in his preconditions for survival. Even these conceptions were merely reactions to the prevailing state of affairs, a compelling objective case to be made for the practicality of an anarchist society.

Whatever progressive role they may have possessed, they now have clearly become regressive and oppressive. They undermine not only the human community but the viability of the planet and all living things on it.

It cannot be overemphasized that the anarchist concepts of the balanced community—a face-to-face democracy, a humanist technology and a decentralized society—rich libertarian concepts are not only desirable, but necessary.

Analysis and editing by David Levison.

To be continued next issue.

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Fifth Estate #102, April 2–15, 1970

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