Accommodating Industrialism

A Third World View of the West German Ecological Movement

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The success of the ecological movement in the First World is of vital importance to the movement in the Third. The industrialized societies have always provided the dominant global development model, and unless the paradigm of industrialism is rejected in the First World, there is little chance of the Third World turning back from the ecologically disastrous path of industrial development. If the ecological movement of the North is serious about the "solidarity" it expresses with the South, it is vital that it succeeds, not only in halting the juggernaut of industrial growth, but in actually forcing it back.

However in the last decade the ecological or "green-alternative" movement in West Germany has moved away from an anti-growth and anti-industrial perspective. This cannot be conclusively proven: the movement as a whole has no central committee resolutions and no definitive program. But in the mass of books, papers, articles, statements, resolutions and programs produced by the many persons and groups belonging to the movement, the change can clearly be seen.

Decreasing Production

In *Ways Out of the Affluence Trap*, published in 1977, Binswanger, Geissberger and Ginsburg advocated a short term policy of "qualitative growth," intended to gradually stabilize the consumption of non-renewable resources. They were also aware that:

"...qualitative growth cannot be continued for an unlimited period, since even a constant rate of exploitation of non-renewable resources would in course of time exhaust the deposits...

"It is necessary only because of the time we gain. It will make it possible for a society facing this challenge to develop and apply new forms of economic and social life that would guarantee security and the survival of future generations."

So in the long term they sought a "survival community" and a "return to the use of renewable resources only." As preparation for a "soft transition" to the survival community, Binswanger et al. proposed "small networks" consisting of "enlarged family-communities." These small networks should provide decentralized "basic services," thus reducing "dependence on the welfare services of the state" and alleviating the "condition of being at the mercy of an economy based on the division of labour." The views put forward at a 1978 conference of ecological activists were summarized by Hartmut Bossel in *Citizens' Initiatives Design the Future*. On the distribution of resources Bossel wrote:

"The right to fair distribution...will also be recognized internationally. In that way the development will come to an end, in which the rich nations become ever richer at the cost of the poor nations and the latter become ever poorer. Resources, goods and services will flow primarily to places where poverty and underdevelopment are the greatest."

The activists assumed that the total volume of production would decrease and "goods that are generally used only occasionally by individuals will be used in common or on a borrowing basis." It was also hoped "to reduce energy requirements so much that they can be largely covered by renewable technologies." The ecology party Grune Aktion Zukunft (Green Future Action), founded in 1978, expressed similar views in its manifesto. It advocated a "balanced economy" and "cyclical technologies." It believed that the dependence of the West German economy on the world market should be reduced and agriculture should have the vital task of providing the people with "food largely from the country's own land." It demanded that decentralization and labour-intensive handicrafts should be promoted, and that:

"Everything must become simpler: human beings, administration, technology, traffic. Only then shall we get more freedom, suffer less from compulsion to consume and less from terror of failing to perform, and along with that suffer less stress, neuroses and other forms of distress."

The Subsistence Perspective

In the second half of the 1970s, the radical thinking apparent from the above quotations (in West Germany now termed the "subsistence perspective") was dominant in the ecological movement. In the 1980s, however, the insistence on a truly radical alternative gave way to a belief that the environmental crisis could be solved through new technologies and an ecological restructuring of industrial society. In *Ecology's Lost Innocence*, Joseph Huber, an influential publicist and theoretician of the alternative movement, proclaimed "the alliance of industry and ecology," which he welcomed as "practical" if not "holy": "If ecology has a future, then it is in industrial form, and industry can only have a future if it becomes ecological." Huber claimed that "the surface of the earth is, of course, limited, but…man and ecology are in reality open systems that can be developed." The limits to tolerable pollution, Huber declared, could not be objectively ascertained, and he concluded:

"Obviously, for a long time to come neither environmental pollution nor the few million more deaths it will cause will constitute an objective limit for the industrial system…The ecological destruction must be stopped, not because it will become unbearable from a scientific and technological point of view, but because it is unbearable from the human point of view."

The purpose of this fine but absurd differentiation was, it appears, to resurrect faith in the industrial system and thus to enhance the acceptance of a technological approach to the ecological crisis. In fact, Huber concluded that actually there was no ecological crisis, but only an economic one. The old industrial era based on oil, coal and steel was coming to an end and the new industries based on microelectronics, genetic and biological engineering, and solar and other ecological technologies would soon bring about a super-industrial breakthrough.

Industry would require fewer raw materials and be less polluting, its energy and raw materials being supplied by inexhaustible sources of sunshine and biomass. The contradiction between ecology and industrialism would thus be overcome. In Huber's opinion, "There are alternatives in industrial society, but not to it." Huber realized that soon there would be a brutal struggle over the distribution of the resources of the earth, and he stated:

"It is clear who would be the losers: the have-nots. They do not have the money to buy the costly things, be they the excluded in this country or the pariahs in the Third World… In no case would there be a new belle epoque of the purposive optimist Herman Kahn. Or there would be one as before—a belle epoque for the well-to-do, but not for the have-nots."

Yet, astonishingly, he was optimistic about the prospects of the Third World. He predicted the coming of a new era, which "would be completed when the peoples of the Third World overcome their proletarian status and the whole world becomes thoroughly industrialized following the new psychological, biological and ecological principles." Huber did not however address the issues of how the Third World would be industrialized, of who would benefit and who would lose through industrialization, or of what would happen to the peasants whose land would inevitably be taken over to supply industry's resources.

An Alternative Within the System

Ecology's Lost Innocence has been extensively quoted from because it contains in a systematic form many of the ideas that have been circulating in the ecological movement since the early 1980s. in 1980, the Federation of Citizens' Initiatives for the Protection of Ecology (BBU), an umbrella organization of 300 to 400 ecological groups, published a *Catalogue of Demands for an Ecological Plan* in the FRG [Federal German Republic]. This clearly stated that "the goal of an ecological economy cannot be attained by means of isolated measures in the area of technological ecological protection, but only if the requirements of ecology become the foundation of the whole economic and social policy." But it went on to claim that "an ecologically orientated economy must by no means be based on zero growth. Only the socially destructive growth of pollutants must be reversed."

The BBU demanded "investments of several hundred billion marks" to reduce water, air and noise pollution but failed to mention that these huge amounts would have to be earned by means of destructive industrial activities, or that this is not a policy of preventing pollution at source, but a policy of first letting pollution be caused and then intercepting it. The BBU canvassed for its Catalogue of Demands with the argument that if adopted they would create several hundred thousand jobs.

In 1982, the year in which Ecology's Lost Innocence was published, the official unemployment figure in West Germany passed two million and the ecology movement began to see solving unemployment as one of its main tasks. In 1982, a green-leftist congress was held entitled "The Future of Work: ways out of mass unemployment and ecological destruction," and the following January the Green Party adopted the economic program put forward in a document, Meaningful Work, Living in Solidarity: program against unemployment and the dismantlement of the welfare state, commonly known as the "Sindelfingen Program."

The solutions proposed both at the Future of Work congress and in the Sindelfingen Program were firmly based within the framework of the existing industrial system. The ecological crisis was seen as secondary to the unemployment problem which would be solved through a massive program of investment in environmental regeneration to create new jobs.

The Entry into Political Power

In 1985, Joe Leinen, who had played a leading role in the anti-nuclear movement, became Ecology Minister in the Social Democratic Government of the state of Saarland, and Joschka Fischer, a leading member of the Green Party, was appointed Ecology Minister in the Social Democrat-Green coalition Government of Hessen.

However the entry of Green activists into positions of political power made little difference to their states' policies, and both Leinen and Fischer ended up having to find new dumping grounds in West Germany and abroad for the rubbish and hazardous wastes of Hessen and the Saarland. Disillusioned with the increasing readiness of the Green Party to enter into coalitions and to endorse the mainstream political process, Rudolf Bahro, one of the country's leading ecological thinkers, left the party in 1985 along with many of his political colleagues. in his resignation statement, Bahro claimed that the Green Party no longer had a basic ecological position.

As if to prove Bahro right, the following year the Green Party adopted a detailed short-term program: Restructuring Industrial Society: a program for overcoming unemployment, poverty and ecological destruction. This so-called "Umbauprogramm" made it clear that the Green Party was seeking an alternative within industrial society. However, some aspects of the Party's economic philosophy are left unclear. In its 1983 "Sindelfingen Program" the party could still state unambiguously:

"The Green Party is convinced that in the Federal Republic of Germany as also in the other industrial nations there is not too little industrial production, but too much: too much energy- and raw materials-consuming mass production, too much production of poisonous pollutants, too much plastic and too much concrete."

But the 1986 Umbauprogramm states:

"…ecological economic policy makes itself independent of the goal of overall economic growth—without committing itself dogmatically to a policy of zero growth, not to speak of a policy of general economic shrinkage and opting out of industrial society…Whereas some branches of the economy must shrink, growth of other branches is desirable."

The Umbauprogramm also equivocates over income and purchasing power, claiming on the one hand that "a restructuring will not be possible without changes in consumption and lifestyle," and on the other that "ecological restructuring will be accepted only if it is guaranteed that it is possible without any loss in job-security and income." The programme also states: "The effects of ecological restructuring on the purchasing power of the low and middle income groups should at least be compensated by raising their available incomes."

Seen in isolation, many of the proposals in the Umbauprogramm appear to make ecological sense. But a program that refuses to commit itself to a policy of zero economic growth even on balance, a program that seeks to defend the present income and purchasing power of the great majority of the people of the richest nation in Europe, cannot be called an ecological program.

The Greens want the impossible: an ecological economy at zero cost. Talk of an ecological economy that does not destroy nature and does not exploit the peoples of the Third World and future generations is simply bluff. The Greens propose to finance the restructuring of industrial society in West Germany by redistributing the present GNP, ignoring the fact that this massive sum is, and can in future only be, available if the destruction of nature and the exploitation of the Third World and future generations continues.

The Consumerist Citizen

The Realo or "realist" faction, which probably represents around 40 percent of Green Party members, has led the way in realigning the movement. Two Reale theoreticians have written that the Green Party should represent the interests of the "new middle classes" to which about 40 percent of voters belong. In February 1988, with several theoreticians advocating an "ecological market economy," one of the chief spokespersons of the Realos said that the goal of the Green Party should be "ecological capitalism." A few months later the Realos presented a "draft manifesto of Green Realpolitik," which declared that Green politics should be aimed at:

"…the urban, liberal, consumerist citizen, who is primarily orientated towards his individual plans for life, who, however, at the same time not only protests against atomic energy and ecological madness, but also feels solidarity with the minorities who are poor and excluded from society."

Whereas in the second half of the 1970s the movement emphasized satisfying basic needs, since the middle of the 1980s the emphasis has shifted to overcoming the ecological crisis without having to reduce standards of living. Thus, Joschka Fischer, when Ecology Minister of Hessen, put an advertisement in a national daily in which he stated that opting out of atomic energy was possible "without having to forgo the comforts one is used to." In the debates that took place after the Chernobyl disaster, speakers from the ecology movement sought to show that the total need for electricity in West Germany at that time could be covered even if all the atomic power plants were shut down—namely by using thermal power to full capacity.

It was conveniently ignored that if this was done on a global scale it would increase air pollution and CO_2 emissions and inflate oil prices, thus adversely affecting Third World countries. Energy savings were discussed, but these were to be achieved, not by means of reducing consumption, but by a state-subsidized program of replacing old equipment with new, more energy-efficient technologies. The final step in this process of accommodating industrialism was reached in a book by Joschka Fischer published in 1989 in which he argued that the West German economy must boom so that it can afford the gigantic sums of money necessary to pay for protecting the environment.

Not everyone in the movement has abandoned the subsistence perspective, but it is clear that, on the whole, the movement has changed its goals. The rapidity of the change is astonishing, but not the change itself. The subsistence perspective calls upon the citizens of industrial societies to be prepared to sacrifice much of their present-day

affluence and privileges. That is difficult and unpopular. But this unpopularity was no problem for the ecological movement as long as it was purely extra-parliamentary.

Those in the movement who sincerely wanted to think through the crisis could not avoid coming to the subsistence perspective, and had no reason to hesitate in expressing their convictions. But this parliamentary innocence came to an end around 1980 when the Green Party was formed. With the party trying to win votes, the pressure to jettison unpopular policies increased, and once the more popular policies were endorsed by the party the subsistence perspective lost ground in the wider movement.

Another obvious reason for the change in perspective was the dominant role played by the large number of leftists in the movement. Their faith in technological progress, their belief that material affluence and high productivity are preconditions for a socialist/communist society and their faith in the working class as the basis of revolution or at least of socio-economic change, were shaken by the realization of ecological limits. But the immediate possibility of an ecological restructuring of industrial society and the somewhat distant prospect of an eco-friendly super-industrial breakthrough appeared to solve their dilemma.

Legitimate Needs and Ecological Limits

But to understand fully the reasons for the change in perspective it is necessary to go a little deeper. The ecological movement has challenged the thesis that human needs are unlimited. But most of the people in the movement are guided by an arbitrary and purely subjective definition of legitimate needs. An objective definition can only be based on what and how much we can take from the earth without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations. The definition of legitimate needs will therefore vary according to the resources and ecological circumstances of a given region.

This should not prove a problem, for, as T. Stryck and H. Wiesenthal put it in *Kommune* 9 (1987),"the needs that must by all means be satisfied so that a person can survive are few in number and low in level. They are limited to food and loving attention from other people." The scope for satisfying these needs is therefore wide. Yet most of those in the movement apply other yardsticks. When, for example, the low wages earned in alternative economic enterprises are discussed, it is not considered that these appear to be low only because they are compared with the wage rates of firms like Siemens, Krupp or Bayer—firms which can only pay high wages because of their environmentally-destructive, exploitative and therefore, "efficient" mode of production.

In the second half of the 1970s, many committed activists believed that a change in values was taking place in the movement, and through it in Western society as a whole. Binswanger et al. hoped that "a far-reaching change in our political consciousness and values [would] change our social relationships and affect our economic system." Bosse] also saw a change in values, which he expected would "exert strong social pressure" in the direction he advocated. The American researcher Ronald Inglehart even spoke of a "silent revolution." Karl-Werner Brand summarized the thesis of Inglehart as follows:

"Basing himself on Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, Inglehart believes that when material…interests have been taken care of "non-material" values like self-realization, participation, aesthetic needs etc. come to the fore. For the population group favored with a middle-class origin and education, and whose childhood and youth was molded by the economic prosperity of the post-war years, post-materialistic values are therefore of primary importance."

This finding rings true but it implies neither a change in values nor a revolution. Post-materialistic values were simply added to the list of needs once material prosperity had been achieved. The prosperity itself was not questioned. In retrospect it appears that the ecological consciousness of the people as well as of the activists in the movement was overestimated. It was visibly widespread, but lacking in depth.

Democracy, Freedom and Emancipation

In the 1970s some German writers predicted that the ecological crisis would cause conflicts and civil disorder, and that a dictatorship would be necessary to maintain order, although, as Johann Strasser argued, the prospects for democracy within an economy committed to continued growth were also dim. Maintaining the levels of affluence reached in the advanced industrial economies, if not further economic growth, was thus taken as necessary in order to protect freedom and democracy.

In 1984, a leftist Green congress, "Ecology Between Self-Limitation and Emancipation," discussed the question: "Is nature so constituted that it allows us a process of emancipation and development, or rather so that it allows, on pain of destruction, only adaptation to its iron laws, so that ecological politics could only be one of imposing limitations and frugality and de-development of society?"

If, despite the ecological crisis and the finitude of our raw material resources, humanity continues to live or strives to attain the "American way of life," then the pessimists will be proved right. If emancipation needs such a high level of affluence then it can only remain the privilege of a few. The rest of humanity must then be excluded from it by force. But, as Sahlins writes, "There are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be easily satisfied either by producing much or by desiring little."

Adopting that second course is surely the way out of the dilemma. We should be seeking freedom in work, not freedom from work; and self-realization and emancipation within and not outside everyday life.* Happiness should no longer be a matter of individual material affluence, but of social conditions and the relations of human beings to each other. That cannot be a de-development of society. On the contrary, it would be a true development of society.

**FE note*: *Fifth Estate* readers familiar with our longstanding critique of work and discussion of the abolition of work may be reminded of the Nazi regime's slogan "Work Makes Free" over the portals of its death camps, but Saral Sarkar is not talking about slave work or wage work in his reference. Rather, as his argument indicates, he means the kind of subsistence activities that will inevitably take place in a society that has moved beyond industrial-capitalism, with its necessary component of wage work.

The idea that all labor can be abolished, even digging in the soil, spinning cotton, putting on a roof, minding the children, etc., has been linked in the minds of some anti-authoritarians to the notion of a technology that will do everything for us—a view that is patently false. Such technology would in fact demand increased drudgery. Sarkar is arguing that in a different kind of society, such subsistence activities can and must take on a different meaning. Sorry, but the abolition of work won't get you out of doing the dishes.

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