
Capitalism, Nature and Eco-Socialism

PRITAM SINGH

The *Socialist Register* founded in 1964 by Ralph Miliband and John Saville has acquired a unique place in progressive literature in the English language by bringing out an annual issue focused on one theme. The 2007 issue deals with the challenge of ecology to socialist theory and practice. The current global discourse around the climate change summit at Copenhagen highlights the contemporary importance of the theme chosen by the editors of the 2007 issue.

Keeping in mind the near impossibility of adequately discussing all the papers (a total of 17) in a single review, I would aim at highlighting and evaluating some of the contributions which appear to me to be of most significance from the viewpoint of articulating an eco-socialist perspective. There are broadly two routes to eco-socialism: one starting from a socialist perspective and then advancing to recognise the centrality of nature in economic life, and the other starting from an ecological perspective and then recognising the class contested character of ecology. I believe that in spite of the differences, the aim ought to be the convergence of the two routes to eco-socialism. While differences should be recognised to arrive at a richer theory and practice of eco-socialism, they should not be given undue importance because the practice of sharpening differences, even when they are not substantial, has been the cause of sectarian divisions and unproductive outcomes in the socialist movement. The editors of the *Socialist Register 2007* have laudably arranged the papers according to the subject studied and not according to the theoretical and political tradition of the contributors. I have, therefore, reviewed these papers in the same order as they have been placed in the journal.

The opening article by Brenda Longfellow titled “Weather Report” describes her

BOOK REVIEW

Coming to Terms with Nature: Socialist Register 2007 edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys with Barbara Harriss-White, Elmar Altvater and Greg Albo (*The Merlin Press, London; Monthly Review Press, New York and Fernwood Publishing, Halifax*), 2006; pp XV+363, £35 hb, £14.95 pb.

experience of making a film aimed at capturing global climate change. This took her to the Haiti floods in October 2004, the dust storms in China in April 2005, the Exxon Mobil annual general meeting in Dallas in May 2005, the Inuit living spaces in Canada in December 2005, the Arctic in April 2005 and the Mumbai floods in July 2005. She weaves the comments on these visits with her overall framework that critiques the view that global climate crisis is either a purely natural phenomenon or a problem caused by “humankind”. She emphasises that the global climate crisis is a result of the ruthless exploitation of natural resources by big corporate entities in an unequal world. Her conclusion is that the most crucial factor in determining future outcomes is the potential shift in societal priorities and values. The conflict is between the continuance of material acquisition and consumption as the arbiter of our values, and the possible triumph of values of social justice, equity and community. “That is what will determine our climate futures. And there is nothing predicatable about that” (p 14).

Neil Smith’s paper “Nature as Accumulation Strategy” argues that though nature, including human labour, has always been a part of the process of capital accumulation, a new stage has now been reached in the capital accumulation strategy vis-a-vis nature in which capital is not only using nature for accumulation, it is even producing nature as a part of the capital accumulation strategy. He refers to biotechnology allowing science to bore

into and transform the core of specific life forms, production of genetically modified (GM) seeds, crops and other organisms, laboratory-manufactured genes and genetically transformed mammals. In contrast with the earlier phase of capital accumulation, which he characterises as the horizontal integration of nature into capital when the dominant form of capital accumulation was territorial expansion of capital, the present strategy of capital accumulation was vertical integration of nature. “This involves not just the production of nature ‘all the way down’, but its simultaneous financialisation ‘all the way up’” (p 33). This means that the fate of capitalism is even more dependent on nature than before, and the financial crisis of capitalism entails even more environmental destruction. The task for eco-socialist critics of capital is, therefore, not to think about preserving nature because production of nature has become a historical reality but to think of social powers that can replace the capitalist production of nature by democratic production of nature.

Fossil Fuels, Renewables and Sustainability

Elmar Altvater in his very well argued paper “The Social and Natural Environment of Fossil Capitalism” makes three interconnected points: one, that there is a congruence between fossil fuels, especially oil energy, and capitalism; second, the availability of oil is coming to an end (in approximately four decades) leading eventually to the crisis of capitalist sustainability, and third, the non-availability of oil would demand reliance upon renewable energy (especially solar energy) and the renewable energy regime would demand a non-capitalist socio-economic order to be compatible with that energy regime.

Daniel Buck in his paper “The Ecological Question: Can Capitalism Prevail” takes a stance that is contrary to that of Elmar Altvater. Buck argues that resource constraint or even resource exhaustion of fossil fuels or, for that matter, of any other form of energy, will not necessarily entail the end of capitalism. Capitalism, according to him, driven as it is by the logic of capital

accumulation based on competition, will prevail although this prevalence of capitalism may not necessarily improve the quality of human life in the form of access to resources needed for fulfilment of human life.

Altwater's and Buck's arguments stand counter posed to one another, with Altwater envisioning the exhaustion of fossil fuels and the necessity for dependence on renewable energy leading inexorably to a non-capitalist organisation of society, and Buck arguing that the logic of capital accumulation is not hampered by the exhaustion of non-renewable sources of energy. However, both tend to veer towards technological determinism in assessing capitalism's capacity to survive. Buck's argument, especially, seems to verge on technological over-determination. How different classes in society will respond to these technological changes and how these responses will shape future social formations, is almost completely neglected by both, but more so by Buck. The absence of human agency in their analysis weakens both arguments though Altwater's analysis is more persuasive due to a relatively stronger historical

dimension in his approach in looking at human interaction with nature.

Barbara Harriss-White and Elinor Harriss in their paper "Unsustainable Capitalism: The Politics of Renewable Energy in the UK" introduce competing economic interests in demonstrating that the downgrading of renewable energy in the UK's energy mix is due to the British state's capitulation to market-driven politics. They make an excellent and detailed critique of what looks like a fragmented and apparently dysfunctional energy policy of the Labour government. Their analysis, however, shows that the overarching neoliberal paradigm provides some coherence to this seemingly disconnected policy. This analysis also highlights an important dimension of contemporary global political-economy, namely, that global agendas have the power to critically influence national economic priorities. They conclude that market-driven politics in the UK, shaped by the neoliberal doctrine, has ensured that renewable energy finds it difficult to form any kind of technological base, either for an alternative model of capitalist development inside the UK, or for an engagement with large developing countries such as China and


India which are about to enter a highly polluting phase of industrialisation.

Dale Wen and Minqi Li, in their paper "China: Hyper-Development and Environmental Crisis" have put forward formidable empirical evidence to show that China's path of capitalist development followed since 1979, and accelerated since the 1990s, is driving it inexorably towards environmental self-destruction. They raise a key developmental question: how to meet the population's basic needs at relatively low levels of consumption of energy and resources? Their view, based both on theoretical grounds and empirical evidence, is that this cannot be accomplished within a market-fundamentalist system. They suggest that the only hope lies in a more egalitarian economy based on economic democracy, and the recovery and cultivation of the commons.

Sustainable Farming

Henry Bernstein and Philip Woodhouse, in their paper, "Africa: Eco-Populist Utopias and (Micro-) Capitalist Realities" combine criticism of two opposite perspectives on environmental "protection" in Africa: the first which pins hopes on some

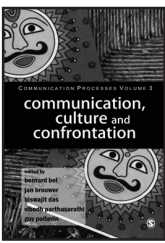
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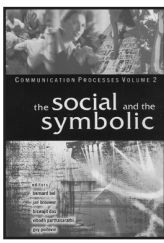
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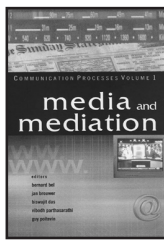


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pre-capitalist farming community modes of economic life preventing environmental degradation, and the second based on the neoliberal framework that propagates that privatisation of common environmental resources can prevent excessive utilisation and hence degradation of these resources. They refer to a set of studies that show that poverty borne out of farming systems not integrated with the agriculture and labour markets can continue to provide low levels of income and livelihood for their populations, with continuing vulnerability to food deficit, and exposure of soils to increasing levels of exhaustion. On the other hand, systems of large-scale capitalist agriculture have been equally destructive of environment. They propose an eco-socialist agrarian perspective that overcomes both the atomised nature of small-scale farming as well as the commodifying character of large-scale capitalist farming. This eco-socialist perspective hinges on democratic mobilisation of rural populations to collectively manage their mutual resources.

Phillip McMichael's paper, "Feeding the World: Agriculture, Development and Ecology" is a masterly summary of the trends in world agriculture in response to the global needs of capital. He emphasises that the "green revolution" technology of mechanisation, use of fertilisers and water, increased farm demand for fuel oils, gasoline and electricity, and in the process, intensified the energy-intensive character of agriculture. The globalisation of food marketing and consumption leads to increase in food transport which has become one of the fastest growing sources of green house gas emissions. McMichael argues that it is only through peoples' movements aimed at relocating agriculture production and consumption would it be possible to stop the ecology-destroying march of globally-organised industrial agriculture.

Resource Use, Waste and Environmental Conflicts

In "The Political Economy of the Kyoto Protocol", Achim Brunnengraber highlights the limited importance of the Kyoto protocol by situating climate change in the context of the nature-society relationship. His view is that the Kyoto protocol has been reduced, more or less, to the

management of crisis in nature by mitigating climate change. The important point that the ecological crisis – manifested through climate change – is a result of the specific mode of the use of nature in capitalism has got underemphasised, and even completely ignored, in the discourse on the Kyoto protocol. He argues that all competing international, national and local interests – and resistances to them – need to be brought into the climate debate so that climate change problems are treated as a part of larger and comprehensive socio-ecological crisis.

In a fascinating paper, "Garbage Capitalism's Green Consumers" Heather Rogers trashes waste-producing capitalism for over-emphasising the importance of recycling as a solution to environmental degradation. This overemphasis, she demonstrates with research into the public relations campaigns of big producers of waste in favour of recycling, has been a calculated move to hide the overproducing strategy and overconsuming practice of American capitalist economy and culture. One piece of important empirical evidence that she cites is, "municipal waste – which includes discards from household, local businesses and institutions like schools – accounts for less than one in every 70 tonnes of garbage; the rest is generated by industrial processes in manufacturing, mining, agriculture, and oil and gas exploration" (p 238). This is enough to capture the misplaced emphasis on recycling that municipalities in the us were encouraged to adopt by corporate interests and their law-making political elites. She sums up forcefully:

Merely putting litter in its place does nothing to curb rubbish output, and recycling as it exists today does little to reshape industrial production in such a way as to diminish the largest category of waste ... With a recycling bin in the corner of the kitchen people often believe that their trash has become benign. Today, it is likely that more Americans recycle than vote – yet greater amounts of rubbish are going to landfills and incinerators than even before (p 238).

The rest of her paper takes a more problematic route. She criticises green capitalism and green consumers from a seemingly socialist "fundamentalist" position that such eco-reforms in capitalism are harmful from the viewpoint of saving the

planet because such reforms can contribute to complacency about capitalism's nature-destroying character. Her position, in criticising eco-reforms in capitalism, is akin to those socialist maximalists who criticise every reform in capitalism (e.g., strengthening democracy, gender equity) as a hindrance to the overthrow of capitalism. I would rather prefer the position of Cindy Katz whom she quotes: "Clean capitalism is better than dirty [one]"¹. Green capitalist reforms can certainly contribute to complacency about capitalism, but these reforms can also create more sound material conditions for a green socialism that could replace capitalism. As Russia's experience tells us, democratic socialism cannot be built in societies with totalitarian political cultures and institutions, similarly green socialism would be more difficult to build on an environmentally-damaging capitalism than on an environmentally-friendly capitalism.

Joan Martinez-Alier, in his paper, "Social Metabolism and Environmental Conflicts" presents a brief outline of the framework of ecological economics in which the economy is seen as a subsystem of the environment. Ecological economics tries to integrate the flows of money and flows of matter into one integrated system. By deploying this method, an argument can be made that the national accounting system should provide a picture of material flows in the same way the traditional gross domestic product (GDP) accounting system provides a picture of the economy in terms of money flows. Martinez-Alier gives the example of the Eurostat methodology which makes provision for presenting the economy as a "material flow analysis". By taking this approach, the classification that Martinez-Alier makes of environmental conflicts can be presented as consisting mainly of two types: those over the use of

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different forms of resources, materials and energy (mines, oil, land, forests, and fisheries etc), and those over the waste and pollution generated from the use of these resources. He sees a common thread linking these different types of environmental conflicts and articulates an economic system that provides an alternative to capital's domination of materials and energy. He characterises the vision of that alternative economic system as "eco-socialism". His paper is most impressive, in terms of the articulation of a socialist vision from an ecological perspective. It would be appropriate to say that Martinez-Alier can be considered as one of the best articulators of the second route to eco-socialism I mentioned earlier.

Political Strategies for Eco-Socialism

Michael Lowy in his paper "Eco-Socialism and Democracy Planning" develops an inspiring argument for democratic planning against both market mechanism and Stalinist-type bureaucratic planning but

slips on the ecological dimension when he argues that the populations in Europe and North America will not have to reduce their standard of living in absolute terms if the capitalist irrationality in production and consumption is replaced by socialist rationality. From an eco-socialist perspective, it cannot be ruled out that ecological rationality might require curtailment of the levels of production and consumption in Europe and America.

Frieder Otto Wolf's paper, "Party-Building for Eco-Socialists: Lessons from the Failed Project of the German Greens" attempts to draw lessons for party-building from his work in the German Green Party which he once represented as a member of the European Parliament. It does seem strange that given his experience and background in practical political struggles, the lesson he draws is that there is a need for more education and self-education, and for the development of "general radical social and political theory". His conclusion appears more Althusserian than eco-socialist!

Gregory Albo, whose paper "The Limits of Eco-Socialism: Scale, Strategy, Socialism" has been placed as the last in the collection as a sort of concluding paper, catches on to the central point in the debate over local versus national/international when he argues that "scale" is the contentious issue. He criticises the dominant view in the ecological/green movement that the local and small-scale is necessarily more nature-friendly and democratic. This small versus large aspect was also discussed by Bernstein and Woodhouse in their paper on African agriculture in the context of small-scale family farming versus large-scale capitalist farming. Albo proposes that it could be argued that large firms have greater capacity to take on leading "environmental technologies" and that "smaller units of production may involve duplication of inputs, inadequate financial leverage to incorporate leading technologies, and even relatively greater use of energy resources" (p 350). He suggests that for the purpose of meeting collective social needs and reducing

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ecological costs, some democratic and coordinated planning capacities, which might be large in scale, might be necessary. He unhesitatingly supports decentralisation: "Socialists have generally favoured the decentralisation of power to local and regional authorities on the basis of extending democracy, arguing that this, rather than a mere defence of the centralised state is the best response to neo-liberalism's ideological appeal" (p 354) but argues correctly that the eco-socialist political challenge is to connect those local and decentralised political struggles to a universal project of socio-ecological transformation.

This set of papers can be considered as the most important publication in the last few years regarding the attempt to articulate an eco-socialist perspective on a range of issues that are relevant to understanding the current ecological crisis of capitalism. It was published before the

current financial crisis of capitalism although there are a number of important insights, specially in Altvater's paper regarding the link between the oil crisis and the financial architecture of global capitalism. There are differences in the nuances of different contributors, for example, between Altvater and Buck on the incongruence between renewable energy and capitalism; between McMichael's emphasis on the need to shift to small-scale farming for sustainable agriculture and a qualified support to large-scale farming by Bernstein and Woodhouse. Albo's sharp critique of the local is also not fully in tune with McMichael's and Martinez-Alier's framework of analysis favouring support for local initiatives and local revolts against global capitalism. These differences reflect the theoretical and political backgrounds of the two different routes to eco-socialism mentioned at the beginning of this review. In bringing these two

different streams of eco-socialist scholarship on one platform, this publication has made a much needed contribution to the consolidation of the eco-socialist perspective. A strengthened and coherent eco-socialist perspective that links local actions to global overviews, decentralised control to centralised coordination, and small initiatives to large projects is historically necessary now as a theoretical and practical alternative to save humanity from the environmental disaster that is emerging as a result of capital's profit-driven exploitation of nature.

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NOTE

- 1 Cindy Katz, "Whose Nature: Whose Culture?" in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (ed.), *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, London: Routledge, 1998, p 52.