

# **Ecology is Key in the Fight Against Capitalism Socialism Could Be a Help, If . . . .**

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Ever since the Greens got started in the United States in the 1980s, voices for socialism have appeared among them. In the past few years they have asserted themselves with renewed vigor within the United States Green Party. Voices promoting socialism, though of a different kind, are also active within, and outside, the Democratic Party as aroused by Bernie Sanders.

A recurring plea by Green party socialists is a clarion call to be independent of capitalism and of the political parties rooted in capitalism, especially the major parties. They promote socialism as the necessary strategy to enable the Green Party to reach and preserve its independence of capitalism and of its political mouthpieces, the Democratic and Republican Parties.

This is an interesting claim. On the surface it may seem valid. But looked at again—the claim is far less convincing or compelling. Especially astonishing is the lack of a genuine understanding of ecology.

When the Greens started out in 1984 we created a document that has stood the test of time. It has enabled us to survive, dissolve, and even at times heal the divisions caused by internal struggles: The Ten Key Values. The very first Value was and should still be, *Ecological Wisdom*. This is the key of the keys.

There is no greater foe of capitalism than ecology. Ecology and capitalism are poles apart, in total contradiction with one another. Where ecology is transcendent and produces a new non-anthropocentric way of life, capitalism dissolves and withers away.

If Greens who want socialism as a strong support for independence against capitalism and a strong support against sliding back into co-habitation with the Democratic Party, they need only learn and affirm and deepen their commitment and understanding of ecological wisdom.

Why haven't they? I have a short answer and a longer one.

## **Short Answer**

The short answer is that ecology, and its philosophical offspring ecological wisdom, are not well understood by socialism and socialists. What the latter seem to understand by the “environment” is akin to the conventional notions present in mass media coverage. Here “the environment” is an add-on to other major concerns of the day. It's along the lines of what Democrats and some Republicans understand about the environmental. It is curious

that many Greens who are socialists take a similar conventional approach to “the environment”. Many latch on to the hybrid word, “eco-socialism. They mean thereby modifying or even diluting ecology to make it fit with socialism.

Since “the environment” comes off as only one among many issues for socialist Greens, it makes sense that they do NOT look to ecology for support in their insistence on independence from capitalism and its political party mouthpieces.

I have noticed the absence of the word “nature” from the tens of thousands of emails and blogs and facebook entrees written by socialist Greens that have come my way as a Facebook user and as member of the U.S. Green Party’s National Committee.

Furthermore, there is seldom a hint that the economy needs to be revamped to reach a steady state dynamic equilibrium. Seldom is there a word about the threat of consumerism and consumption capitalism. Seldom is there any emphasis on conservation or on thrift. Nor is there a sturdy and compelling analysis of the pervasive threat of climate change. It is mentioned but as in passing.

A huge structural issue for the human and other inhabitants of planet earth is this: can the planet and its over-burdened populations find governing institutions to meet the dire challenges to survival, global impoverishment, and perpetual and destructive warfare? I don’t find much genuine focus on this from among socialists in the Green Party.

What IS the main analysis according to most of the Greens who are socialists? What are their major preoccupations? This question invites and requires a longer answer.

### **The Longer Answer**

To suggest an answer. I recall the stellar but foreshortened thinking of Murray Bookchin. He was very important and influential in the intense debates in the decades before and during the formative years of the Green Party. The way he formulated the essential starting point of analysis remains as the starting point of Green minded socialists today.

His starting point was not ecology and the human relation to nature. The starting point was for Bookchin the domination of man over man. (I use the word “man” because that is the way he phrase it and usually with emphatic effect. As I continue with the article, I will change from “man” to “human.”) At the very core of his thought was a strong leaning to anthropocentrism. Bookchin thundered against “deep ecology.” Their mistake, he maintained in harsh lectures, was to claim that man’s domination over nature was key—far more important than man’s domination over man. Bookchin passionately argued that man’s domination over man was the key. This led to and included the argument that man’s domination over nature only stemmed from a (presumably) prior domination of man over man. This was a one-sided conclusion, putting man’s domination over man in the driver’s seat so speak, just as the deep ecologists Bookshn was opposed to put man’s domination over nature in the driver’s seat. Each side (which is the way both militantly saw it, as opposing “sides”) was dogmatic.

During those debates I offered that both “dominations” are vitally important, and—the crucial point—that both are simultaneously and interactively causative. I still maintain that, but realize more than I did then that to follow Bookchin meant and means abandoning the crucial importance of the human relation to nature. That we humans are part of nature in the most intimate and fundamental way was thus lost to view. Anthropocentrism reared its ugly head once again—even in the writing and brilliant philosophy of a Murray Bookchin, a frontier thinker against capitalism. Yet I realize now that he was not the opponent of capitalism that he and his followers affirmed and affirm so zealously. He and they have abandoned the one thing that assures a serious and credible opposition and replacement of capitalism: ecology and its great offspring ecological wisdom.

The depreciation and (not so implied) dismissal of the human relationship to nature has continued and still inhabits the underpinnings of thought by Bookchin’s Green Party heirs and the underpinnings of thought by younger Green socialists who may be ignorant of Bookchin and his work.

A one-sided concentration on “man’s domination over man,” (as if that were the only preeminent concern, front and center) has meant that strategy for action tends to rip away at oppression (which is good!) but at the same time, and unfortunately, the strategy is impoverished in showing a way beyond the apparently intractable, universally inevitable “domination of man over man.” An ecological consciousness and ecological thinking could show that way, but the anthropocentric bias of forefronting “man’s domination over man” crowds it out, stifles it. We become not a Green Party at all, but a standard party like the Democrats, only farther “left”. But it is not a real “left.” It is only a “left” on the continuum of anthropocentric politics. All major and minor political parties are on that continuum. Except the Green Party. But within the Green Party there are those socialists who unfortunately have not ended their intellectual and strategic ties to anthropocentric views and politics.

Thus, given a one-sided fixation on human domination over human,” there ensues a clamoring of oppressions. Each oppression favors itself as the one “more” oppressed than any others. Identity politics--to a most distressing and harmful degree--begins to take over.

### **Conference on Racism**

I recall vividly a conference on racism which I attended at Brooklyn College in the late 1960’s. Here Jews and Blacks got into a hurtful and harmful verbal battle. Jews insisted that the oppression they had suffered and endured and continue to suffer and endure was greater than that suffered by Blacks. This was countered by the equal number of Blacks at the conference who insisted that the oppression they had suffered and endured and continue to suffer and endure was the greater. Disagreement turned to angry shouting and barely suppressed invective. I vainly tried to get into the discussion-turned-melee. Finally, I was able to seize a moment and nervously made the argument that both Jews

and Blacks were victims of the system—the capitalist system. This did nothing to deflect the angry mood or arguments.

I now recall the point I sought to make with a degree of chagrin. It was my budding socialist moment. I now see that, though my point had its merits (and several people afterwards agreed that it was good to have made that point), I did not see through or beyond my assumption that eliminating capitalism provides the answer to the bitter quarrel. Capitalism itself is just another instance of “man’s domination over man.” Something deeper is going on; something deeper was being left out.

I know now that what was left out was the root of the domination syndrome itself. The root of the domination syndrome gets a strong portion of its vicious start in the domination of human nature over nature—and therewith the fateful separation of mind from body. Once you bring that into the picture and once you explore and delve into what it means to reverse that domination you realize that we human beings are intimately part and parcel of nature. This can and does lead to a healing relationship with one’s self and a healing understanding of all human relationships.

A strong sense of community can now thrive—and in two directions at once: the community of the human and the natural AND the community of human beings with one another. On that basis capitalism-- as a particularly onerous and cruel system of “domination of man over man” can and will be dismantled and destroyed. To this, I devote a part of the book that I published earlier this year, *Ecological Politics: for Survival and Democracy* (Lexington Books).

### **But Socialism Could Help! If . . . .**

But socialism could help! Could make a difference. After all, socialism believes that human beings are social beings, not, as in capitalism, which believes that human beings are by nature set against one another in perpetual and predatory competition. Socialism believes in altruism, not in the egotism that is inherent in capitalism.

But, once again, there is more to it than that. Socialism’s belief that human beings are social beings is not very strong. The belief relies on idealism and exhortation: one ought to be kind, one ought to be altruistic, one ought to be good. But one must ask, what is the exhortation (the idealistic directive) based on? What is its philosophic and scientific grounding?

This is murky. It is not based on nature—or rather it is based on the separation of the human from nature. Socialism has a long history of sharing an anthropocentric attitude towards nature with capitalism. The rise of capitalism went hand in hand with the philosophy and science of early modern thinkers led by Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and John Newton. They laid the groundwork for an all out anthropocentric separation of

the human from nature, a nature they viewed as immersed in predatory competition, the war of all against all as Thomas Hobbes put it.

In later generations, an Immanuel Kant can say it is up to us, the enlightened species, to judge nature, control nature, and even force nature into what we humans require; and a Freud can say, in an essay dealing with how peace among humans could prevail, that we (human beings) must band together in the great struggle against nature. Few socialist thinkers disagreed. Most have acquiesced, if not applauded, the ascendancy of the human over nature, a nature understood to be there for us to control because of its “bestial” proclivities, including our wayward human nature.

Only with the coming in the early years of the last century of Einstein’s immense revolution and his scientific and philosophic heirs, starting with quantum physics, did the mechanistic and atomistic world view begin to fade, undergo a radical shift. This shift has also meant a strong shift in the scientific and philosophic attitude toward nature. The cloying and stifling domination of science and philosophy by anthropocentric views and assumptions has been dissolving for decades.

This fortunate process is going on apace, but most politics and politicians in the world are still enslaved to this dissolving world view. It is now time for socialist leaders and thinkers to help end that enslavement, their own often unwitting enslavement as well. Greens who are socialists must now get a new grip on reality: learn fully that we are already related by nature. We don’t have to be schooled and indoctrinated to believe that we must become related; that we must be manipulated by human contrivance of idealistic moral systems, to do what nature has failed to do.

Our job, based on the new dawning awareness that we are already related by nature, is to figure out what kind of relationship, what kinds of relationship, we need and want. Nature has already related us. We need wisdom (ecological wisdom) on how to make the relationships work--and work better.

Science and philosophy can now be a grounding support for the socialist belief that we are social beings; based on fact, on a new and refreshing science, not on “up-in-the-air” idealistic sentiments of wishing, sermonizing and moralizing.

It is not for ecology to be instructed and adapted by socialism. Rather it is for socialism to be instructed and adapted by ecology.

### **Pull quotes**

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