

Lessons
of the **70s/80s** Strategies for
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An open letter to the ecology movement

Social ecology has to begin its quest for freedom not only in the factory but also in the family. By Murray Bookchin.

Murray Bookchin is a lifelong militant who has provided critical and constructive analysis of contemporary social movements through his seminal works on anarchism and ecology. In his best known (and highly recommended) book, "Post-Scarcity Anarchism," Bookchin argued how a true revolutionary movement must integrate ecological ideas with an anarchist critique of society. In the following piece he extends this analysis.

With the opening of the eighties, the ecology movement in both the United States and Europe is faced with a serious crisis. This crisis is literally one of its identity and goals, a crisis that painfully challenges the movement's capacity to fulfill its rich promise of advancing alternatives to the domineering sensibility, the hierarchical political and economic institutions, and the manipulative strategies for social change that have produced the catastrophic split between humanity and nature.

To speak bluntly: the coming decade may well determine whether the ecology movement will be reduced to a decorative appendage of an inherently diseased anti-ecological society, a society riddled by an unbridled need for control, domination and exploitation of humanity and nature—or, hopefully, whether the ecology movement will become the growing educational arena for a new ecological society based on mutual aid, decentralized communities, a people's technology, and non-hierarchical, libertarian relations that will yield not only a new harmony between human and human, but between humanity and nature.

Perhaps it may seem presumptuous for a single individual to address himself to a sizable constituency of people who have centered their activities around ecological concerns. But my concern for the future of the ecology movement is not an impersonal or ephemeral one. For nearly thirty years I have written extensively on our growing ecological dislocations. These writings have been reinforced by my activities against the growing use of pesticides and food additives as early as 1952, the problem of nuclear fallout that surfaced with the first hydrogen bomb test in the Pacific in 1954, the radioactive pollution issue that emerged with the Windscale nuclear reactor "incident" in 1956, and Con Edison's attempt to construct the world's largest nuclear reactor in the very heart of New York City in 1963. Since then, I have been involved in anti-nuke alliances such as Clamshell and Shad, not to speak of their predecessors Ecology Action East, whose manifesto, *The Power to Destroy, The Power to Create*, I wrote in 1969, and the Citizens Committee on Radiation Information, which played a crucial role in stopping the Ravenswood

reactor in 1963. Hence, I can hardly be described as an interloper or newcomer to the ecology movement.

My remarks in this letter are the product of a very extensive experience as well as my individual concern for ideas that have claimed my attention for decades.

It is my conviction that my work and experience in all of these areas would mean very little if they were limited merely to the issues themselves, however important each one may be in its own right. "No Nukes," or for that matter, no food additives, no agribusiness, or no nuclear bombs is simply not enough if our horizon is limited to each one issue alone. Of equal importance is the need to reveal the toxic social causes, values, and inhuman relations that have created a planet which is already vastly poisoned.

Ecology, in my view, has always meant *social* ecology: the conviction that the very concept of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human, indeed, of women by men, of the young by their elders, of one ethnic group by another, of society by the state, of the individual by bureaucracy, as well as of one economic class by another or a colonized people by a colonial power. To my thinking, social ecology has to begin its quest for freedom not only in the factory but also in the family, not only in the economy but also in the psyche, not only in the material conditions of life but also in the spiritual ones. Without changing the most molecular relationships in society—notably, those between men and women, adults and children, whites and other ethnic groups, heterosexuals and gays (the list, in fact, is considerable)—society will be riddled by domination even in a socialistic "classless" and "nonexploitative" form. It would be infused by hierarchy even as it celebrated the dubious virtues of "people's democracies," "socialism," and the "public ownership" of "natural resources." And as long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction.

The emergence of the women's movement, even more so than the counterculture, the "appropriate" technology crusade and the anti-nuke alliances (I will omit the clean-up escapades of "Earth Day"), points to the very heart of the hierarchical domination that underpins our ecological crisis. Only insofar as a counterculture, an alternate technology or anti-nuke movement rests on the non-hierarchical sensibilities and structures that are most evident in the truly radical tendencies in feminism can the ecology movement realize its rich potential for basic changes in our prevailing anti-ecological society and its values. Only insofar as the ecology movement *consciously* cultivates an anti-hierarchical and a non-domineering sensibility, structure and strategy for social change can it retain its very *identity* as the voice for a new balance between humanity and nature and its goal for a truly ecological society.

This identity and this goal is now faced with serious erosion. Ecology is now fashionable, indeed, faddish—and with this sleazy popularity has emerged a new type of environmentalist hype. From an outlook and movement that at least held the promise of challenging hierarchy and domination have emerged a form of *environmentalism* that is based more on tinkering with existing institutions, social relations, technologies, and values than on changing them. I use the word "environmentalism" to contrast it with ecology, specifically with social ecology.

Where social ecology, in my view, seeks to eliminate the concept of the domination of nature by humanity by eliminating the domination of human by human, environmentalism reflects an "instrumentalist" or technical sensibility in which nature is viewed merely as a passive habitat, an agglomeration of external objects and forces, that must be made more "serviceable" for human use, irrespective of what these uses may be. Environmentalism, in fact, is merely environmental engineering. It does not bring into question the under-

lying notions of the present society, notably that man must dominate nature. On the contrary, it seeks to facilitate that domination by developing techniques for diminishing the hazards caused by domination. The very notions of hierarchy and domination are obscured by a technical emphasis on "alternative" power sources, structural designs for "conserving" energy; "simple" lifestyles in the name of "limits to growth" that now represent an enormous growth industry in its own right—and, of course, a mushrooming of "ecology"-oriented candidates for political office and "ecology"-oriented parties that are designed not only to engineer nature but also public opinion into an accommodating relationship with the prevailing society.

Fashionable Ecology

Nathan Glazer's "ecological" 24-square-mile solar satellite, O'Neill's "ecological" spaceships, and the DOE's giant "ecological" windmills, to cite the more blatant examples of this environmentalistic mentality, are no more "ecological" than nuclear power plants or agribusiness. If anything, their "ecological" pretensions are all the more dangerous because they are more deceptive and disorienting to the general public. The hoopla about a new "Earth Day" or future "Sun Days" "Wind Days," like the pious rhetoric of fast-talking solar contractors and patent-hungry "Ecological" inventors, conceal the all-important fact that solar energy, wind power, organic agriculture, holistic health, and "voluntary simplicity" will alter very little in our grotesque imbalance with nature if they leave the patriarchal family, the multinational corporation, the bureaucratic and centralized political structure, and property system, and the prevailing technocratic rationality untouched. Solar power, wind power, methane, and geothermal power are merely *power* insofar as the devices for using them are needlessly complex, bureaucratically controlled, corporately owned or institutionally centralized.

Admittedly, they are less dangerous to the physical health of human beings than power derived from nuclear and fossil fuels, but they are clearly dangerous to the spiritual, moral and social health of humanity if they are treated merely as *techniques* that do not involve new relations between people and nature and within society itself. The designer, the bureaucrat, the corporate executive, and the political careerist do not introduce anything new or ecological in society or in our sensibilities toward nature and people because they adopt "soft energy paths;" like all "technotwits" (to use Amory Lovins' description of himself in a personal conversation with me), they merely cushion or conceal the dangers to the biosphere and to human life by placing ecological technologies in a straitjacket of hierarchical values rather than by challenging the values and the institutions they represent.

Hierarchy and Domination

By the same token, even decentralization becomes meaningless if it denotes logistical advantages of supply and recycling rather than human scale. If our goal in decentralizing society (or, as the "ecology"-oriented politicians like to put it, striking a "balance" between "decentralization" and "centralization") is intended to acquire "fresh food" or to "recycle wastes" easily or to reduce "transportation costs" or to foster "more" population control (not, be it noted, *complete* population control) over social life, decentralization too is divested of its rich ecological and libertarian meaning as a network of free, naturally balanced communities based on direct face-to-face democracy and fully actualized selves who can really engage in the self-management and self-activity so vital for the achievement of an ecological society. Like alternate technology, decentralization is reduced to a mere technical stratagem for concealing hierarchy and domination. The "ecological" vision of "municipal control of power," "nationalization of industry," not to speak of vague terms like "economic democracy," may seemingly restrict

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