

Social Ecology

Background

- ▶ The elite class manipulates the natural resources “for their own benefits but only at a substantial cost to the environment and disadvantaged social group.”
- ▶ There has always been a tussle between development and the environment.
- ▶ It was presumed that industrialization was the major cause for the ecological degradation.

What is social ecology

- ▶ The term “social ecology” was given by **Murray Bookchin** (1964) in his book “Ecology & Revolutionary Thought”.
- ▶ It is the study of the reciprocal relationship between the human society and the ecological infrastructure.
- ▶ Social ecology claims that the environmental crisis is a result of the hierarchical organization of power and the authoritarian mentality rooted in the structures of our society.
- ▶ The Western ideology of dominating the natural world arises from these social relationships.
- ▶ **"The domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human"** ('The Ecology of Freedom' page 1. Murray Bookchin)

Note: Murray Bookchin was an American anarchist and libertarian socialist

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- ▶ Social ecology aims to replace our mentality of domination with an *ethics of complementarity*. Such an ethics reflects our true role which is to create a fuller, richer world for *all* beings.
- ▶ This ethics of complementarity has a spiritual dimension that is sometimes described by social ecologists as the "respiritization of the natural world" but is clearly not a call for a deistic theology. the study of the nature of God and religious belief.
- ▶ "The spirituality advanced by social ecology is definitively naturalistic rather than supernaturalistic or pantheistic."
- ▶ The alternative is society based on ecological principles; an organic unity in diversity, free of hierarchy & based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life.
- ▶ The way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to addressing the ecological crisis. If we change human society then our relationship with the rest of nature will become transformed (to separate ecological problems from social in a very obvious and unacceptable manner. interpret wrongly would be to grossly misconstrue the sources of the growing environmental crisis.

Key principles

- ▶ The core principle of social ecology is that ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Ecological problems cannot be understood, much less resolved, without facing social issues.
- ▶ Social hierarchy and class legitimizes our domination of the environment and underpins the consumer system.
- ▶ "The root causes of environmental problems are such as trade for profit, industrial expansion, and the identification of "progress" with corporate self-interest." (*What Is Social Ecology?*, Murray Bookchin)
- ▶ Social ecology emphasizes that the destiny of human life goes hand-in-hand with the destiny of the non-human world.
- ▶ "Social ecologists believe that things like racism, sexism, third world exploitation are a product of the same mechanisms that cause rainforest devastation"

The term "Third World" is used to refer to developing and less-developed countries, which are often exploited by Western capitalist countries

- ▶ Bookchin calls for a holistic 'ecological sensibility' that would encourage play and celebrate imagination.
- ▶ Bookchin claims that most environmentalists focus on the *symptoms* of our problems rather than the causes, so mistakenly focus on technology or population growth.
- ▶ Unless we change society, 'soft' technologies won't make any difference either. Simple technology can still wreak environmental damage if the ideology that uses it is unchanged: The forests of England were cut down with axes that had not changed since the Bronze Age.
- ▶ Today's environmentalism is mere "environmental engineering" that is more concerned with ^{attempt to repair or improve something in a casual or desultory way.} "tinkering with existing institutions...and values than changing them." Environmentalism is used to "win large constituencies, not to educate them." (Quotes from 'Open Letter to the Ecology Movement' in *Towards an Ecological Society*, Bookchin).

Human and Nature

- ▶ The "struggle for existence" or the "survival of the fittest" (to use popular Darwinian terms) explains why increasingly subjective and more flexible beings are capable of dealing with environmental changes more effectively than are less subjective and flexible beings.
- ▶ Conceiving nonhuman nature as its own evolution rather than as a mere vista has profound implications-ethical as well as biological-for ecologically minded people.
- ▶ Bookchin emphasizes that human beings are basically just highly intelligent primates. We are a part of nature and suggestions that we are a 'special case' are superficial and potentially misanthropic. having or showing a dislike of other people; unsociable.
- ▶ Bookchin says that to depict human beings "as 'aliens' that have no place or pedigree in natural evolution, or to see them essentially as an infestation that parasitizes a highly anthropomorphic version of the planet (Gaia) the way fleas parasitize dogs and cats, is bad thinking, not only bad ecology."

Human as Part of Evolutionary Process

- ▶ Far from being unnatural, humans are an expression of a deep natural process. Bookchin believes that human consciousness is a result of nature striving for increasing complexity and awareness.
- ▶ Humans are nature that has become self-aware. **We are part of biological evolution, which Bookchin calls 'first Nature', but also have a unique social awareness which he calls 'second nature'.**
- ▶ Our second nature, the development of technology, science, social institutions, towns and cities, all depended on human abilities that evolved from first nature.

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- ▶ How these problems emerge, the ideologies they produce, the extent to which they contribute to biotic evolution or abort it, and the damage they inflict on the planet as a whole lie at the very heart of the modern ecological crisis.
- ▶ Bookchin rejects the 'either/or' thinking behind the commonly held opposites anthropocentricity and biocentricity. The opposing principle, biocentricity, claims that all beings have equal intrinsic value and is bound up with the notion of a 'biocentric democracy' which Bookchin describes as "almost meaningless".
- ▶ Social ecology integrates first (biotic nature) with second (human nature). Human society and non-human nature are connected in one evolutionary flow.

Notion of decentralization

- ▶ To truly know and be able to give interpretative meaning to the social issues so arranged, we should want to know how each idea derived from others and is part of an overall development.
- ▶ Social ecology calls upon us to see that nature and society are interlinked by evolution into one nature that consists of two differentiations: first or biotic nature, and second or human nature.
- ▶ Human nature and biotic nature share an evolutionary potential for greater subjectivity and flexibility. Second nature is the way in which human beings as flexible, highly intelligent primates inhabit the natural world.[That is to say, people create an environment that is most suitable for their mode of existence]

Environmental changes produce by human

- ▶ Humans act upon their environments with considerable technical foresight, however lacking that foresight may be in ecological respects.
- ▶ Their cultures are rich in knowledge, experience, cooperation, and conceptual intellectuality; however, they may be sharply divided against themselves at certain points of their development, through conflicts between groups, classes, nation states, and even city-states.
- ▶ Nonhuman beings generally live in ecological niches, their behavior guided primarily by instinctive drives and conditioned reflexes.
- ▶ Human societies are "bonded" together by institutions that change radically over centuries.
- ▶ Nonhuman communities are notable for their fixity in general terms or by clearly preset, often genetically imprinted, rhythms.
- ▶ Human communities are guided in part by ideological factors and are subject to changes conditioned by those factors.

Origins of Social Domination

- ▶ How, then, did the social-eventually structured around status groups, class formations, and cultural phenomena emerge from the biological?
- ▶ Biological facts such as lineage, gender distribution, and age differences were slowly institutionalized, their uniquely social dimension was initially quite egalitarian. supports the principle of equality for all people.
- ▶ Later it acquired an oppressive hierarchical and then an exploitative class form - so the social institutions were slowly reworked at various periods and in various degrees, into hierarchical structures based on command and obedience.
- ▶ Hierarchy in its earliest forms was probably not marked by the harsh qualities it has acquired over history (gerontocracies were earlier form of hierarchy; e.g. tribal councils or council of elders, chiefdoms etc.). a state, society, or group governed by old people.

Male domination

Horticulture is the art and science of growing plants for human consumption, medical purposes, or aesthetic pleasure

- ▶ Social domination originated with human males dominating females.
- ▶ With the appearance of cattle-drawn plow agriculture, the male begins to invade the horticultural sphere of woman, who had used the simple digging stick, and her earlier economic predominance in the community's life is thereby diluted.
- ▶ Male dominance becomes extremely active and ultimately yields a world that is managed by male elites who dominate not only women but also other men.
- ▶ "Why" hierarchy emerges is transparent enough: the infirmities of age, increasing population, natural disasters, certain technological changes that privilege male activities of hunting and caring for animals over the horticultural functions of females, the growth of civil society, the spread of warfare.

The Idea of Dominating Nature

↓ People who are preliterate haven't learned how to read or write yet

- ▶ "Nature," in the broad sense of a biotic environment from which humans take the simple things they need for survival, often has no meaning to relating to or based on animism, the belief that natural objects, natural phenomena, and the universe itself have souls preliterate peoples (even when they celebrate animistic rituals and view the world around them as a nexus of life).

- ▶ With the rise of hierarchy and human domination, however, the seeds are planted for a belief that nature not only exists as a world apart, but that it is hierarchically organized and can be dominated.

- ▶ For instance, the study of magic reveals this shift clearly: Early forms of magic did not view nature as a world apart. Its worldview tended to be such that a practitioner essentially pleaded with the "chief spirit" of the game to coax an animal in the direction of an arrow or a spear. Later, magic becomes almost entirely instrumental; the game is coerced by magical techniques to become the hunter's prey.

↓ This shift is evident in the evolution of magic: early magic appealed to spirits for help, while later forms sought to manipulate nature directly for desired outcomes.

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- ▶ While the earliest forms of magic may be regarded as the practices of a generally nonhierarchical and egalitarian community, the later forms of animistic beliefs betray a more or less hierarchical view of the natural world and of latent human powers of domination.
- ▶ The idea of dominating nature has its primary source in the domination of human by human and the structuring of the natural world into a hierarchical Chain of Being (a static conception, incidentally, that has no relationship to the evolution of life into increasingly advanced forms of subjectivity and flexibility).

- ▶ Social ecology refuses to ignore the fact that the harm elitist society inflicted on the natural world was more than matched by the harm it inflicted on humanity; nor does it overlook the fact that the destiny of human life goes hand-in-hand with the destiny of the nonhuman world.
- ▶ We can only overcome the ideology of dominating nature by creating of a society without hierarchical structures or economic classes.

"GROW OR DIE!"

- ▶ But just as hierarchies and class structures tend to acquire a momentum of their own and permeate much of society, so too the market began to acquire a life of its own and extended its reach beyond limited regions into the depths of vast continents.

- ▶ Exchange ceased to be primarily a means to provide for ^{basic} modest needs, ^{to overthrow or ruin something from the foundation} subverting the limits imposed upon it by ~~a medieval association of craftsmen or merchants, often having considerable power.~~ guilds or by moral and religious restrictions.

→ Exchange shifts from fulfilling basic needs to expanding beyond limitations set by guilds or moral and religious rules.

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- ▶ By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the new industrial capitalist class with its factory system and commitment to limitless expansion began to colonize the entire world, and finally, most aspects of personal life.
- ▶ Unlike the feudal nobility, which had its cherished lands and castles, ^{the highest social class who were usually the richest and most powerful families in a realm} ~~the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes~~ the bourgeoisie had no home but the marketplace and its bank vaults.
- ▶ As a class, they turned more and more of the world into an ever-expanding domain of factories.

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- ▶ On the other hand, the industrial capitalists of the modern world spawned a bitterly competitive marketplace that placed a high premium on industrial expansion and the commercial power it conferred, and functioned as though growth were an end in itself.
- ▶ It is crucially important, in social ecology, to recognize that industrial growth does not result from a change in a cultural outlook alone and least of all, from the impact of scientific rationality on society.
- ▶ It stems above all from harshly objective factors churned up by the expansion of the market itself, factors that are largely impervious to moral considerations and efforts at ethical persuasion.
- ▶ The key to this law of life-to survival-is expansion, and greater profit, to be invested in still further expansion. Indeed, the notion of progress, once identified by our ancestors as a faith in the evolution of greater human cooperation and care, is now identified with economic growth.

This law of survival, driven by market expansion, is mostly immune to moral influence.
The primary goal is continuous expansion and increased profit, feeding into further growth.

Progress, once seen as advancing human cooperation and care, is now equated with economic growth.

- ▶ The point social ecology emphasizes is not that moral and spiritual change is meaningless or unnecessary, but that modern capitalism is structurally amoral and hence impervious to any moral appeals

having no sense of right or wrong, or showing no concern about whether behavior is morally right or wrong

unable to be affected by.

- ▶ Maxims like "business is business" explicitly tell us that ethical, religious, psychological, and emotional factors have absolutely no place in the impersonal world of production, profit, and growth.

- ▶ It is grossly misleading to think that we can divest this brutally materialistic, indeed, mechanistic, world of its objective character, that we can vaporize its hard facts rather than trans forming it.

Believing we can strip this materially focused world of its objective nature is highly misleading. Instead, we should aim to transform it rather than wish its concrete realities away.

► Bookchin claims that industrial growth isn't the result of a change in a cultural outlook alone, nor is it due to the impact of scientific rationality. Rather it stems from the principle of the market itself, the demand to grow or die.

► A society based on "grow or die" as its all-pervasive imperative must necessarily have a devastating ecological impact.

► Given the growth imperative generated by market competition, it would mean little or nothing if the present-day population were reduced to a fraction of what it is today.

► The ever-expanding market system that had its roots in one of history's most fundamental social transformations: the elaboration of hierarchy and class into a system of distribution based on exchange rather than complementarity and mutual aid.

The constantly growing market system originates from one of history's most significant social changes: the development of hierarchy and class into a system where goods are distributed through trade rather than cooperation and mutual assistance

The Ecological Society

- ▶ Social ecology is an appeal not only for moral regeneration but also, and above all, for social reconstruction along ecological lines.
- ▶ Although always mindful of the need for spiritual change, social ecology seeks to redress the ecological abuses that society has inflicted on the natural world by going to the structural as well as the subjective sources of notions like the "domination of nature."
- ▶ Social ecology challenges the entire system of domination itself and seeks to eliminate the hierarchical and class edifice that has imposed itself on humanity and defined the relationship between nonhuman and human nature.

► Social ecology advances an ethics of complementarity in which human beings must play a supportive role in perpetuating the integrity of the biosphere, as potentially, at least, the most conscious products of natural evolution. Indeed humans are seen to have a moral responsibility to function creatively in the unfolding of that evolution.

make (something) continue indefinitely.

Social ecology promotes an ethics that emphasizes the importance of humans supporting the integrity of the biosphere, recognizing them as potentially the most aware products of natural evolution. It suggests that humans have a moral duty to actively participate in the ongoing evolution of nature. Therefore, social ecology emphasizes the necessity of creating tangible social structures that reflect this ethical principle, enabling humans to engage as conscious and morally responsible participants in the interactions among species.

► Social ecology thus stresses the need for embodying its ethics of complementarity in palpable social institutions that will give active meaning to its goal of wholeness, and of human involvement as conscious and moral agents in the interplay of species.

Conclusion



- ▶ In place of the existing hierarchical and class system social ecology proposes an egalitarian society based on mutual aid, caring and communitarian values. People in this new society would appreciate that the interests of the collective are inseparable from those of each individual.



- ▶ Property would be shared and, ideally, belong to the community as a whole. In this "commune of communes" property would not belong to private producers or to a nation-state.

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- ▶ This transformation is to be achieved through radical collective action and co-operative social movements. The process of eliminating all domination must begin:
“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.”
(*'Open Letter to the Ecology Movement'*, in *Towards an Ecological Society*, Bookchin)

Bookchin believes that oppressive hierarchies and inequality are at the root of the problem, and that only a true community can solve the environmental crisis.

Reference

- ▶ Bookchin, Murray. “Reflections: An Overview of the Roots of Social Ecology”, Harbinger, A Journal of Social Ecology (Vol 3, No. 1). Available at <http://social-ecology.org/wp/2002/09/harbinger-vol-3-no-1-reflections-an-overview-of-the-roots-of-social-ecology/>
- ▶ Bookchin, murray. What is Social Ecology? Available at: <http://www.anarchija.lt/images/pdf/Murray%20Bookchin%20-%201993%20-%20What%20Is%20Social%20Ecology.pdf>