**PREFACE TO A DIALECTICAL SOCIAL ECOLOGY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The context of these reflections is the crisis of the Earth, which includes the Sixth Mass Extinction, the developing climate catastrophe, and the specter of the collapse of the biosphere, and the crisis of humanity, which encompasses the tragedy of domination, brutal exploitation, and growing nihilism in a social world capable of abundance and flourishing for all. The popular neologism for our new age of crisis, the “Anthropocene,” is rejected here because of the attribution of causal agency to a generic *Anthropos* or homogeneous humanity, overlooking the deeper institutional causes. The alternative of “Capitalocene” is admittedly better, since it identifies a major underlying structural cause. But were we to adopt such a “real cause” approach, we would need four terms to do the job: “Capitalocene” to identify Capital, “Technocene” to identify the technological Megamachine, “Imperiocene,” to identify the imperial State, and, not least of all, “Androcene,” to identify Patriarchy.

Yet, all of these focus on human causality and fail to identify precisely the nature of the transition from the previous geological era, the Cenozoic. The term “Cenozoic” signifies a “New Era of Life on Earth,” and describes objectively what occurred in the biosphere, and was recorded directly in the fossil record. Its successor should therefore focus not on human institutions, but on what the Earth itself is now undergoing, and which will in the future be recorded in the fossil record. Thus, the most accurate, Earth-centered, term is the “Necrocene,” the “New Era of Death on Earth”

The purpose of the following discussion is to outline briefly the nature of a dialectical social ecology, which is, above all, part of the project of *confronting* and *moving beyond* the social and ecological crises that were just mentioned. This will be done, first, through an analysis of the grounding of such a dialectical social ecology in a critical-dialectical naturalism. This will include both a discussion of the nature of radical dialectic and an analysis of some of the key issues in the philosophy of nature. Next, the nature of a dialectical and naturalistic theory of value will be discussed. Moving on from this ontological, methodological and axiological basis, some elements of a dialectical social ecology itself will be analyzed. First, a social-ecological theory of freedom and domination will be summarized, and then a social-ecological theory of the major spheres of social determination will be sketched. Finally, there will be a very brief discussion of an eco-anarchist politics that is consonant with such a critical-dialectical naturalism and dialectical social ecology.

**ON RADICAL DIALECTIC**

It must be recognized from the outset that dialectical thinking is anarchic thinking. It proceeds from an openness to the phenomena or appearances, that is, the modes of nature naturing. In a certain sense, it expresses our primal wonder at the spontaneous manifestation of becoming. It renounces our tendency to impose our wills, demands, and expectations on a creative and self-revealing Universe. It therefore rejects the ultimacy of any “principle” or *arché*. By this is meant first the *arché* in the sense of any *concept* that is objectified, reified, substantialized, essentialized, hypostatized or in any sense deified, raised to an ontologically higher level than the phenomena, the (non-)things themselves. And it means secondly the *arché* in the sense of an *origin,* a place of full being, in which is something is accorded “inherent existence,” or pure being in-itself, and is thus hierarchically raised above the flow of the phenomena, the anarchic naturing of nature.

Because of the way our minds have evolved, we have a tendency to apply repeatedly concepts that work in one familiar experiential context but fail completely in a different context. Ordinary thinking seems to follow the famous definition of insanity (probably falsely) attributed to Einstein. Normal humans not only perform the same things over and over and expect different results. They also repeat the same erroneous ideas over and over again and expect truth to appear. For example, we now know that the “fundamental building blocks” of nature are fundamentally flows. They are not really “blocks” and they do not “build” up anything. Nevertheless, even those who know this (theorist included) often insist on filling up their minds with “fundamental building blocks.” They hold on to building block mind when science suggests that we should consider thinking in a much more dialectical way.

But why not? We were conditioned by long experience on the Serengeti plain, necessarily developing a pragmatic, objectifying mind that would help us successfully escape large predators and procure food (while at the same time developing other, often contrary, more relational, aspects of our social being). We did not encounter black holes or subatomic particles, an expanding universe or quantum entanglement until long after the deep structure of that mind was formed. Neither did we encounter any technological megamachines, corporate-state apparatuses, or models of global climate change. We therefore have the same problems with biological and social nature as we have with physical nature.

So, we end up living in world in which a great many crucial things are going on ecologically and socially that we simply cannot comprehend through objectifying, substantializing, and essentializing, as opposed to dialectical, thinking. The problem is that we are implicitly committed to an ontology of “It is what it is.” The commonsense mind is stubbornly dualistic. Things must be waves or particles, but not both, or indeterminately one or the other. Our thinking about things is conditioned by a long evolutionary history of relating to and conceptualizing things in certain objectifying ways. As we will see later on, our social thinking is conditioned by a social history of experiencing social phenomena in certain more complex but also immediately pragmatic ways (according to institutional, ideological, imaginary and ethotic modes of determination). Dialectic leads us to discover in all of these areas that “It is what it isn”t.” Dialectic implies an “isisntist” ontology in which it *never* is what it is and it *always* is what it is not.

Dialectic is not merely a theory or theoretical methodology. It is an all-embracing practice, an *ethos*. Hegel explains that this dialectical ethos (what he calls “the life of Spirit”) is not a “life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it.” And it is a profoundly an-archic practice. It reaches truth “only by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Radical dialectic reveals that change and transformation take place through negation, contradiction, and unexpected reversals of the course that conventional thinking quite reasonably and quite incorrectly expects. It shows that reality is always one step ahead of conceptualization, and advises us, with the great ancient dialectician Heraclitus: “always expect the unexpected, or you will never find it” (“it” being the deviously dialectical truth, which is always a truth beyond truth). A thing always is what it is not and is not what it is. Determination is negation and opposites interpenetrate.

It is also important to learn the lessons of Buddhist dialectic, which has in important ways been the most radical form in the history of thought. The concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent origination has been basic to that dialectic for two and a half millennia. According to this principle (which is really an anti-principle) all things are *sunya*, or “empty”, which means that they have no self-contained essence or substantiality. The concept of *sunyata*, or “emptiness”, is very mystifying to non-dialectical interpreters, whether they are naïve sympathizers hoping desperately to be mystified, or narrowly analytical critics eager to dismiss it as nonsense. These mis-interpreters tend to prefer the misleading translation of *sunyata* as “the Void,” which makes emptiness sound either intriguingly or stupidly vacuous.

Such superficial interpretations fail to pose the crucial question: “Empty—but empty of what?” The answer, a commonplace in Buddhist philosophy, is that things are “empty of inherent existence.” This means that so-called “things” must be seen as abstractions from a network of relations. We might say, using Western philosophical terminology, that these relations are “internal” ones that define the nature of the thing itself, as long as we remember that “things” can have “natures” only on the conventional epistemological level, but never on the ultimate ontological level. There is ultimately no thing itself. We can abstract an “object” from the network of relations and attribute a “nature” to it “from our side”. Nevertheless, we can never discover any essential or substantial nature that exists “from its own side.” It never merely “is what it is.” Just as in a language a signifier has meaning only through its relation to all other signifiers, a being ultimately has being only through its relation to all other beings. It has, as Hakuin Zenji famously stated it, “a true nature that is no nature.” It has “no nature” because its nature extends out infinitely into the past, present and future of a the more comprehensive nature that is itself only its own naturing.

**DIALECTIC AS LIBERATION**

The etymology of the term “dialectic” gives us further insight into its nature. It contains the idea of duality or opposition on the one hand (from “dia,” meaning “across”), and connectedness between opposing elements on the other (from “legein,” meaning “gathering”). Radical dialectic has always preserved these two crucial and inseparable moments: that of negation and opposition, and that of relation. All dialectical development encompasses both at once. A dialectical perspective finds that contradiction is inherent in nature and in that aspect of nature that we call “thought.” It has no difficulty accepting the fact that experimental data may lead to conceptualizing phenomena as being simultaneously both wavelike and particle-like. Unlike Einstein, it can be so indulgent as to let God play dice occasionally, or let dice play God. Dialectical thought can accept the conventional, provisional reality of the world of separate beings, selves, or objects without attributing absolute, self-sufficient being to them. But it also negates and goes beyond this provisional level.

Dialectic is not only about negation but also about preservation. However, what is “preserved” in dialectical development is not merely a “good side” of an opposition that is left over when a “bad side” is negated, and the result presumably purged of all its “badness.” The remainder always contains unassimilated elements, and often contains further explosive contradictions. Authentic dialectic is always a traumatic process. It is always about the intrusion of the psychical, social and natural real. It shows that it is not *all about us*, though we have to discover a lot more about how it is about us in order to get to it, to find that it is *all about all*, and about *all within that all* that is *not all*.

The categories of analysis, the objects of investigation and the investigators themselves undergo transformation in the process of dialectical practice. We should not overlook the momentous implications of this statement. It means that the practice of dialectic is in a deep sense a therapeutic one, both for the subject and for the world. It requires deep self-reflection and self-critique that leads to self-transformation, to the discovery of the truth of the self, or non-self, and to the further practice that follows. It also requires deep social reflection, social critique, and social transformation. And it leads to a discovery of the ultimate identity between self- (or non-self) transformation or liberation and social transformation or liberation. As the great Zen master Dogen famously said, “to study the self is to forget the self and to find realization in the myriad things.”

As these reflections imply, the approach defended here is not only a dialectical one but also a critical one. Critique is inseparable from dialectic. In the process of dialectical analysis, we not only allow truth to reveal itself, but also uncover the obstacles to the emergence of truth. Dialectical critique is about overcoming of blockages to the flow of thought and the free movement of concepts. These blockages exist on at least four levels. The first is the transhistorical, evolutionary level of the general constraints of the human knowing process, such as our necessary tendency to impose rigid, static categories on a world of incessant change and self-transformation and, above all, to perceive illusory identity where there is difference, multiplicity and otherness. The second is the social-historical level, that of the social ideology, social imaginary, and social ethos, in which categories, conceptual schemes, imaginary significations, dispositions, and structures of practice designed to legitimate and facilitate the operations of a social order distort experience and limit one’s concepts. The third is the microsocial level of more particular social groups, institutions and tendencies (including dissident and oppositional ones) within a society, in which one’s attachment to a collective ideology, imaginary and ethics creates various degrees of false consciousness and systematic distortions of experience. And finally, there are blockages on the personal level, resulting from an individual’s unique and particular alienating and traumatizing experience that generates a specific set of neuroses and defense mechanisms.

So it is all about practice, and, we might say, about liberation. Marcuse, in “A Note on Dialectic,” describes “an inner link between dialectical thought” and “the effort to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce and benefit from the facts.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Dialectic is a quest to overcome, both theoretically and in engaged practice, the repressive, hierarchical dualisms that have plagued humanity throughout the history of civilization. These include dualisms such as humanity-nature, masculine-feminine, civilized-primitive, reason-emotion, mind-body, spirit-flesh, ruler-ruled, rich-poor, capitalist-worker, colonizer-colonized, etc. But not least of all it aims at destroying the dualism between theory and practice. It challenges us to use it as an integral part of the project of destroying the systems of domination that are legitimated by all these dualisms.

**THE DIALECTIC OF NATURE**

A dialectical naturalism will affirm the contemporary philosophical connotation of “naturalism” as strongly grounded in the natural sciences. Over fifty years ago in “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought”[[3]](#footnote-3) Bookchin presciently argued for the revolutionary implications of the science of ecology. Yet, it took some time for social ecologists to begin moving beyond the obsolete “balance of nature" model that was invoked frequently in that essay, and the literature of social ecology since then has seldom attempted to come to terms with the most radical developments in contemporary science, not to mention contemporary philosophy. A developed critical and dialectical naturalism that can form the basis for a dialectical social ecology will have to do so.

The relevance of quantum physics to social theory and practice is far from self-evident; however, a dialectical naturalism that purports to ground social ecology must necessarily take seriously its implications for our thinking about being, nature, causality. identity, time, and space. A more obvious area of inquiry for a social-ecological project concerns the significance of epigenetics, and its findings concerning the “plasticity of the genome,” with all the implications both for challenging conservative, deterministic and inegalitarian assumptions about human nature, and for facing greater possibilities of manipulation and commodification.[[4]](#footnote-4) Another obviously relevant development is the evidence presented by experimental psychology of the role of innate biological factors in the development of tendencies toward mutual aid and cooperative behavior. A social-ecological perspective also requires investigation of the validity of enactivism in cognitive science, and its possible contributions to a more dialectical and non-dualistic view of the mind and knowledge. Finally, not to neglect entirely the *sciences humaines*, it seems curious that queer theory, perhaps the most dialectically explosive inquiry into concepts of natural and social *identity* and *difference*, has been conspicuous by its absence in most discussions of social ecology.

More generally, a dialectical naturalism will develop an account of the natural (including the natural-social) world that is consistently critical and radically dialectical. This will include a demonstration of the ways in which natural phenomena include moments of negation, preservation, and transcendence. Such an account (*pace* Bookchin) will not reduce dialectical development to the Aristotelian model of the orderly movement from potentiality to actuality, but rather explore the ways in which developing phenomenon include real contradictions and negativity. A critical-dialectical naturalist analysis will, in its depiction of nature, draw on all the dialectical concepts that have been mentioned, including European philosophical ideas of anti-essentialism, anti-substantialism, and internal relations, and radically dialectical ideas in Asian philosophy such as the emptiness of all phenomena of inherent existence and the interdependent co-origination of all beings. A fundamental methodological procedure of a critical-dialectical naturalism is to apply consistently Whitehead’s concept of “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

This applies to various usages of the concept of “unity-in-diversity,” which has become a cliché in social-ecological discussions. It is important that this concept should retain all its resolutely dialectical implications, including the existence of radical contradiction within any putative whole. Thus, although a critical dialectical naturalism has a strong integrative or holistic moment, it should be distinguished clearly from forms of substantializing or essentializing holism that focus one-sidedly on the privileged reality of the whole. In fact, the use of the term “holism” in any sense is somewhat misleading, since it tends to reinforce the illusion that wholes are fully whole, constituting a kind of ultimate substance. To the contrary, wholes are always incomplete, are in a process of either becoming whole or becoming less whole, and they contain contradictions that undermine any fully attained wholeness. A critical-dialectical naturalism must reject the view that the whole is ontologically prior to the part, more metaphysically real than the part, or deserving of more moral consideration than the part. So, at most it might be called a holism/anti-holism. However, it might be preferable not to call it a “holism” at all, but rather a “holonism,” since it recognizes both putative wholes and putative parts to be *holons*, that is, relative wholes in relation to their parts, and relative parts in relation to other, greater wholes.

Yet, even this would be ultimately inadequate, for the holon suffers from some of the same limitations as does the whole and the part. To the extent that it is either whole or part, or both simultaneously, there will still exist still incompleteness, processes of becoming and unbecoming, and contradictions that undermine to a certain degree even the holonic quality, the holonicity, of a being. So, we are perhaps left with a holonism/anti-holonism, which, whatever its superior value, will also reveal itself to be *ultimately* inadequate. The underlying (dialectical) problem is that objects or things as we ordinarily conceive of them are not ultimate, so that any concepts that qualify phenomena or aggregates of phenomena in an objectlike or thinglike manner will, beyond any valid and necessary usefulness, ultimately encounter contradictions. The ontology of a dialectical naturalism is in the last instance an object-disoriented ontology (ODO). The truth of the thing is a relative truth, and it must be explored in its relativity. A dialectical naturalism takes the truth of the thing *seriously*, but it does not take it *fanatically*, as ordinary mind quite often does.

A dialectical naturalism must accepts the conclusion of late modern (or “post-modern”) science that reality consists ultimately not of a *collection* or even a *system* of separate objects, but rather of a *field* consisting of what has variously been conceptualized as internally related events, processes, occasions, or information. This reality is ontologically prior to differentiation, and indeed, to phenomenal "nature" itself. As eco-socialist and profoundly social-ecological theorist Joel Kovel points out, this primordial continuum, “so far as the most advanced science can tell us” consists of “plasmatic quantum fields; one single, endlessly perturbed, endlessly becoming body."[[5]](#footnote-5)

**NATURA NATURANS**

As this statement indicates, what is ontologically primary is not only this primordial unity, but also a primordial process of creative becoming, the emergence of plurality and novelty. A dialectical social ecology will thus theorize social phenomena in relation to the larger direction of evolutionaryemergence in the Universe. It will examine the course of planetary evolution as the generation of increasing complexity and diversity and the progressive emergence of value. As Mumford stated it, an examination of the “creative process" of "cosmic evolution" reveals it to be "neither random nor predetermined" and shows that a "basic tendency toward self-organization, unrecognizable until billions of years had passed, increasingly gave direction to the process."[[6]](#footnote-6) A dialectical naturalism will present a coherent account of this creative process and the complex emergent universe that is its manifestation.

The Ciceronian distinction between “first” and “second” natures has been used for this purpose by some contemporary philosophers and social ecologists. This ancient concept has been adapted for diverse and sometimes contradictory theoretical purposes. The distinction may be useful for overcoming dualisms; however, it can also perpetuate them when its terms become convenient and weakly ecologistic substitutes for conventional conceptions of “nature” and “humanity.” Nature is a vast dialectical system of emergence and continuity that has produced many “levels” of natural being (though if they are merely inertly categorized, this tells us very little about how they express the movement and self-activity of nature). Minimally, a dialectical naturalism must theorize the interrelationships and mutual determinations between energetic (or quantum informational), physical, chemical, biological, psychological, and social “natures.” One crucial point about these “natures” or levels of emergence, is that none of them is a purely “human” or “non-human” sphere. “Humanity” (human becoming) and “non-humanity” (non-human becoming) are diffused (“poured out”) through various levels of natural being.

In traditions related to social ecology the idea of humanity as the self-consciousness of nature has been an important one. It is a valuable but not unproblematic idea. Bookchin stated it as the idea that “humanity is nature rendered self-conscious.” There is a certain ambiguity in the concept of “rendering” which connotes “causing to become.” For what is it that might carry out such “rendering?” To say that humanity is a mode of *nature* “rendering” *itself* reflectively (or rather reflexively) conscious would be closer to the dialectical and naturalistic reality. But it might be better to say that humanity is a mode through which nature’s reflective and reflexive consciousness emerges or through which nature expresses its reflective and reflexive consciousness. Almost a century earlier Reclus came a bit closer to this in calling Humanity *la Nature prenant conscience d’elle même*, meaning Nature “taking” or “assuming” consciousness of “herself.”

The problematic aspects of this general concept include the degree to which forms of nature’s expression other than the human ones are neglected, and the degree to which human consciousness is privileged over other modes in which nature expresses itself through humanity itself. First, as pointed out by philosophers of organism, beginning in ancient times, continuing through Spinoza and Hegel, and extending to Whitehead and contemporary process philosophy, all of nature is a vast system in which the whole knows (prehends) itself on many levels and in a multitude of ways. A social ecology is heir to this tradition and to the evolutionary philosophies that trace the emergence of stages of self-organization and awareness within this system. Thus, we must recognize the ways in which many forms of being express both nature’s consciousness and also other aspects of its being. Second, we should recognize that we are ourselves *more than* the consciousness of nature. We are nature’s self-expression in the physical, chemical, biological world, psychological, and social worlds. In this context, human knowing, sensing, and acting are all specific modes of nature knowing, sensing, and acting in diverse ways upon itself, and, it must be added, in which these processes achieve consciousness of themselves and their universality of scope. We might thus say on the most general level that “humanity as nature becoming self-expressive.”

If we take this perspective, it might lead us to give more attention to another very crucial area of this self-expression. We may seek to uncover and develop the ways in which we are a form of nature becoming *self-caring*. This relates to another crucial topic, social-ecological ethics as an ethics of care, and ties in with one of the most important themes in the social-ecological tradition, mutual aid (and the related phenomena of cooperation and solidarity). Human evolution within the context of planetary evolution can only be comprehended and appreciated adequately by examining the interaction and mutual determination between species and species, between species and ecocommunities, and between species, ecocommunities and the Earth as a whole, and by studying communities and ecosystems as complex, developing, self-transcending unities-in-plurality. Such an examination reveals that the manifestation of growing potentiality for freedom (as self-organization, self-determination, and realization of value and goodness) depends on the existence of symbiotic cooperation at all levels--as Reclus and Kropotkin pointed out well over a century ago. We can therefore see a striking degree of continuity in nature, so that the cooperative ecological society that is the goal of a social ecology and social-ecological politics is found to be rooted in the most basic levels of emergent, self-organizing, self-realizing being and life.

**A SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF VALUE**

A dialectical naturalism presupposes such continuity within a developing, internally interacting and internally related whole (understood in the holonistic sense discussed earlier). Accordingly, consideration of the attainment of good within an ecosystem requires consideration of the attainment of good by the organisms that constitute that system. While an extreme holism might point to a preference for the good of the whole system over that of some or even all parts, a dialectical social-ecological view proposes that the greatest common good will be achieved through the participation of particular organisms in that good, as it emerges over an extended period of time. In the same way, the good of the human community cannot be pursued at the expense of the particular goods of any of its members, but rather can only be attained to the extent that it is embodied in the flourishing of all (freely participating and committed) members of the community. A systemic analysis shows that the concern for the common good increases the possibilities for the greater realization of good over time by all the members of the community.

The result of such considerations is that an ethics of social ecology will be on the one hand an ethics of flourishing and on the other an ethics of care. If we compare a social ecological ethics with morally individualistic perspectives, we find that in many ways “flourishing” will fill the space occupied in the latter by “intrinsic good,” while “care” and related concepts such as “mutual aid” and “solidarity” will fill the space of “rights” and “duties.” The development of such an ethics is a very large and complex project, so only one key aspect of this undertaking will be discussed here, its grounding in a dialectical and naturalistic axiology or value theory.

Such a theory will recognize our human nature as the self-expression of value-generating nature in the form of a center of value-experience. Our value-experience (as communal beings with primate, mammalian, vertebrate, etc. natures) will allow us to comprehend and theorize value at various levels at which good can be realized (the organism, species, population, etc.) and then to integrate the results into a dialectical interpretation of the larger system of value. This allows us to face the overriding ethical challenge of determining how we can follow our own path of realizing good as a human community while at the same time allowing the entire earth community to continue its processes of evolutionary unfolding of value and goodness. A crucial link between these two goals is the understanding of how the flourishing of life on earth is constitutive of the human good, as we dialectically develop in relation to the planetary whole.

In carrying out this project, a dialectical and naturalistic theory of value will seek to transcend atomistic theories, without dissolving particular beings (including human beings) into the whole, whether the whole of nature or of the biosphere. Eco-philosopher Holmes Rolston's analysis, and especially his critique of the conventional division of value into intrinsic and instrumental varieties, contributes greatly to the development of a social ecology of value. As he shows in his theory of systemic value, when value is generated in a system, it is not generated in a merely "instrumental" form, for there is no specific entity or entities for the good of which the value is generated as a means. Nor is it simply "intrinsic" value in the sense that it there is a single coherent, definable locus or sum of loci of good within the system. Accordingly, the value that exists within the system “is not just the sum of the part-values. No part values increase of kinds, but the system promotes such increase. Systemic value is the productive process; its products are intrinsic values woven into instrumental relationships."[[7]](#footnote-7)

Such a systemic analysis flows from an authentically ecological understanding of value within ecosystems or eco-communities. The ecosystem, or rather, larger eco-community that has shaped the species, is internally related to it, and is embodied in its very mode of being--is a value-generating whole. Ultimately, the Earth must be comprehended as, for us, the most morally significant value-generating whole. We must fully grasp the conception of a planetary good realizing itself through the greatest mutual attainment of good by all the beings that constitute that whole--in terms of both their *own* goods and their contribution to shared *systemic* goods of the various part-wholes in which they participate. It is only if we theorize in a fully dialectical manner the interrelationship between the experience of value and the attainment of good at all these levels that we can successfully develop an ethically grounded dialectical social ecology.

**TOWARD A DIALECTICAL SOCIAL ECOLOGY**

A dialectical social ecology is first of all, an *ecology*. As such, it directs us to the *logos*, the underlying meaning and structure of the *oikos*, or household, and thus, the community. Ecology in this primordial sense calls our attention to the deepest realities concerning the communities of which we are a part, from the most particular and local to the most universal and global. Traditionally, the "social" realm has been counterposed to the "communal" one, as in Tönnies' famous distinction between society (*Gesellschaft*) and community, (*Gemeinschaft*). Yet, social ecology (qua ecology) is a project of reclaiming the communitarian dimensions of the social. The etymology affirms this quest. The term "social" is derived from "socius," maeaning “companion." A true society may thus be thought of as a relationship between companions, a human community that forms an integral part of the larger Earth community or household. A dialectical social ecology is the project of making this idea a reality.

A complete theory of such a dialectical social ecology cannot be outlined here, but two major elements will be sketched briefly. The first is a dialectical social-ecological theory of freedom and domination and the second is a dialectical social-ecological theory of social determination.

**FREEDOM AND DOMINATION**

At the beginning of the 19th century, Hegel proclaimed in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* the dialectical precept that “the truth is the whole,” though, as he also demonstrated, the role of dialectic is to explore the untruth and limits of any whole. Later in the 19th Century, Elisée Reclus created a material basis for Hegel’s claims by developing a social geography that investigated the Earth Story or geohistory, as the unfolding story of the planetary social and natural whole, and the ways in which we fit into this story. He showed it to be the epochal history of the emergence and flourishing of human and natural communities, of the progressive devastation of these communities through the March of Civilization and Empire, and of the potential liberation of humanity and the Earth from the chains of domination. Through the project of demonstrating geohistory to be a world-historical struggle between freedom and domination, Reclus helped lay the foundations not only for a critical social geography but also for critical and dialectical social ecology.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The development of an adequate theory of freedom and domination remains a central project of a critical and dialectical social ecology. As part of this project, I propose a “Third Concept of Liberty” encompassing a theory of social freedom based on communal individuality, social self-realization, communal self-determination, and relationships of love, respect and recognition.[[9]](#footnote-9) This concept incorporates dimensions of the negative conception of freedom as noncoercion, the positive conception of freedom as self-determination, and the positive conception of freedom as self-actualization and flourishing of beings. A fully developed critical-dialectical and social-ecological theory will delineate the ways in which these dimensions are mutually reinforcing, are in tension with one another, and come into partial or radical contradiction with one another.

Freedom is found to some degree at all levels of being: from the self-organizing and self-stabilizing tendencies of the atom to the level of the entire universe evolving to higher levels of complexity and generating new levels of being. In our own planetary history, embryonic freedom can be found in the autopoiesis of all life, and takes on increasingly complex forms, including the possibility of humans as complex social beings attaining their good through a highly developed and respectful relationship to other humans and the natural world. The realization of such freedom requires that humanity attain consciousness of its place in the history of the Earth and of the Universe, that it develop the ethical responsibility to assume its role in larger processes of self-realization, and that human social institutions be reshaped to embody the conditions that would make this knowledge and ethical commitment into practical historical forces.

Domination, on the other hand, can be seen as having three major dimensions through which the subjects of domination are controlled, exploited, and instrumentalized. The first is the systematic use of coercion and the threat of coercion to interfere with the lives and well-being of persons. The second is the systematic denial to persons and communities of real agency in the shaping of their destinies. The third is the systematic imposition of constraints on the self-realization and flourishing of persons, communities, and the natural world. All three are elements of social domination, while the third is at the root of the domination of the larger nature.

The concept of domination is more primary in social ecological critique than is the related term “hierarchy.” Domination is, by definition, directly antithetical to freedom, whereas hierarchy in some important senses is not. The forms of hierarchy that are the object of extensive anarchist critique are those in which “archy” specifically denotes domination.  However, “hierarchy” is used in other senses in philosophy, psychology, linguistics, music, mathematics, computer science, organizational theory, biology, and other fields. Indeed, there are even senses in which social hierarchies are not defined as involving domination. Though a dialectical critique of certain systems of (“dominating”) hierarchy is part of the project of a dialectical social ecology, this project is a dimension of the more comprehensive project of the critique of all forms of domination.

A major focus in a critical-dialectical analysis must be the investigation of the role in social domination of certain crucial spheres of social determination. As part of this investigation, there must be a comprehensive, historically grounded analysis of the ways inwhich social domination works, both through overt processes of dominance andsubordination, and through impersonal mechanismsthat are largely unconscious, automatic, systemic,and structural. An outline of this crucial area of inquiry will be presented shortly, First, however, several points should be made about the domination of nature.

First, the domination of nature should not be seen as a mere “idea,” but rather as a geohistorical reality. It occurs when human institutions systematically constrain the processes of flourishing of beings in the natural world. The potential for such domination is found, beginning in prehistory, in modes of thinking, perceiving, sensing, and feeling conditioned by the human metabolism with the rest of the natural world. Its actuality can be seen in the effects of systems of domination on the biosphere, culminating in human monopolization of the planet’s primary production, and in other aspects of planetary control and exploitation.

Furthermore, the domination of nature cannot be dismissed as an illusion on the trivial grounds that complete and total domination of nature is impossible. This claim is no more coherent than would be the claim that domination of humans by humans can be dismissed as an illusion because complete and total domination of any group of humans is impossible. Such a claim is demolished in Hegel’s famous Master-Slave dialectic and its many successors in the history of critique. In fact, domination occurs when power (as “power-over”) is exercised in ways that interfere significantly with the flourishing of a being or beings for the sake of any extraneous, instrumentalist, self-interested ends of the dominator or dominating group. This realtion of domination and being-dominated occurs in both the domination of nature (including ecosystems, species, populations, and organisms) and in forms of human social domination.

**SPHERES OF SOCIAL DETERMINATION**

There are four spheres of determination that are essential to the analysis of how social reality is generated, how it is maintained, and how it might be transformed. These spheres are the social institutional structure, the social ideology, the social imaginary, and the social ethos. Though there are valid alternative conceptualizations of a social topology of such spheres, the schematization of “four spheres” seems to be most useful theoretically within the context of a critical-dialectical naturalism and dialectical social ecology.

Since there is a dialectical relationship between these spheres, they should not be thought of as discrete realms, or absolutized in any way. No social institutional structure is conceivable without reference to the social ethos, since structures embody, in part, structures of social practice. The mass media as an institutional structure is inseparable from forms of concrete social practice that make use of and are in turn deeply conditioned by mass media technologies. Similarly, no social imaginary signification is conceivable apart from its relation to social ideology, since images,in many ways, reflect and interact with concepts. For example, the imaginary signification “rugged individualist” reflects and interacts with moral injunctions about the virtues of “hard work” and “self-reliance” that form part of the social ideology. Significantly, the megastructures of the society of advanced consumer capitalism, the technobureaucratic militaristic state, and the technological megamachine all immediately generate awe-inspiring images of power and wealth. In short, the spheres of determination are theoretical constructs or systemic abstractions that are useful in analyzing a social whole that consists of constellations of phenomena that interact dialectically and are internally related.

The first sphere of social determination, the social institutional sphere, consists of the objective and external structures of social determination (when abstracted from the simultaneously internal-external and objective-subjective social whole). It includes, the structure of capital and its various sectors, the structure of the state apparatus, and the structure of the technological and bureaucratic systems. It includes the external, formal structure of social practices, and the material infrastructure, since institutions consist not merely of structural principles, but of the actual structuration of material resources in accord with such principles. The other three spheres are, from a certain analytical perspective, the internal and subjective realms of social determination (given all the qualifications just mentioned). Yet all of them have external and objective correlates in the social institutional sphere. It is important that we not look upon the relation between the “objective” institutional sphere and the three “subjective” spheres as a “base-superstructure” relationship, but rather one of mutual determination and internal relations. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, the “external” is *internally* related to the “internal.”

The second sphere of social determination is the realm of social ideology. A social ideology can simply mean a system of ideas that is socially significant and contains a greater or lesser degree of truth and value to the society. However, in the critical sense, an ideology is a system of ideas that purports to be an objective depiction of reality, but, in fact, constitutes a systematic distortion of reality on behalf of some particularistic interest or some system of differential power. Though we might be tempted to say that we aspire to replace the dominant institutional structure, social imaginary, social ethos and social ideology with new liberatory ones, in the case of ideology it is better to say that we aim to replace all social ideology with a form of ecological and communitarian reason. In this way, we will restore the common logos, the logic of the commons.

The third sphere of social determination is the realm of the social imaginary. This is the sphere of the community’s collective fantasy life. It is the realm of the “fundamental fantasy,” a self-image that is much more highly invested with psychical energy than any mere “self-concept,” and which is a central determinant in the life of each person. The social imaginary includes socially conditioned images of self, other, society, and nature. It encompasses the images of power, success, heroism, and personal gratification expressed in the prevailing myths and paradigmatic narratives of the community and culture, though it also consists of all the reactive images that mirror the dominant images as their other. The study of the social imaginary explores the social dimensions of desire and demand. Because social imaginary significations are so intimately related to our quest for meaning, and, in the contemporary world, for self-justification, they are invested with intense levels of psychical energy. Much as in the case of the social ethos, this sphere has been generally neglected not only in mainstream social theory, but also in most leftist and radical social thought.

The final sphere of social determination consists of the social ethos. “Ethos” is used in the sense of the constellation of social practices, habits, affects, feelings, and sensibilities that constitute a way of life. The social ethos is the realm of “culture” and “habitus,” but the question of social ethos should also lead us to think about the education of the feelings and the paideia of sensibilities. Ethos is the sphere of social psychological reality, and of the tone and mood that pervade everyday life. It is at once the most physiological and the most metaphysical sphere. Moreover, it is the most ontological, since it is the realm not only of feelings, perceptions, sensations, etc., but also the realm of the dominant sense of being (as a sense of appropriation, a sense of creation, etc.).

Ethos can only be understood through a specific analysis of everyday life and all the habits, practices, gestures, and rituals that it entails, along with the emotional and affective. The ethos expresses our mode of living in and enacting our social and cultural world, and the ways in which that world lives in and acts through us. The weakness and ineffectiveness of the counter-ideologies to which many give lip-service, and which some believe in very deeply, results from the fact that while they abstractly theorize that “another world is possible,” their adherents at the same time proclaim and legislate through their everyday lives, through their immersion in the dominant social ethos, that “this world is inevitable.”

What is important for liberatory social transformation is an understanding of the ways in which the spheres of social determination interact dialectically to create a social world. Among the major goals of the project of a dialectical social ecology are the following: to theorize adequately, and in a historically and empirically-grounded manner, the spheres of social determination as spheres of dialectical mutual determination; to explore the ways in which the interaction between these spheres of social determination shapes the nature of the social whole; to explain the ways in which many elements of these spheres also contradict and subvert one another, and thus to point the way toward possibilities beyond the existing social world; and to demonstrate the relation between the modes of functioning and the dynamic movement and transformation of these spheres and the social ecological crisis of humanity and the Earth.

**ECOANARCHISM**

The topic of this discussion has been the nature of a dialectical social ecology and the kind of critical-dialectical naturalism in which it can be grounded. Implicit (and occasionally more explicit) in this analysis has been the question of how an eco-anarchist politics follows from such an ontology and social theory. Even though this topic is not the central theme here a few comments on it might be useful. The analysis of dialectic in relation to nature and society suggests both the kind of critical consciousness and the kind of methodology that can give direction to the development of such a politics. The discussion of value theory suggests the kind of ethical basis in which it can be rooted. The analysis of freedom and domination shows how such a politics can fit into the larger geo-historical problematic of liberation and self-realization. And the analysis of social determination suggests the ways in which such a politics can realistically confront the system of domination and open up realistic possibilities for the liberation of humanity and nature.

All of this points to the need for a developed eco-anarchist politics that expresses a primary *ecological* commitment to promoting the flourishing of the Earth community, and a primary *anarchic* commitment to defending that flourishing from all destructive forces that would crush and extinguish it. The core meaning of eco-anarchism follows from the etymology of the term. It derives from *oikos*, meaning “household” or “home,” and *anarche,* from *an*, meaning “without,” and arche, meaning loosely “rule,” and more precisely, “domination.” It is an abbreviated form of “ecological anarchism,” which incorporates a third term, *logos*. The *logos* of any being is the way and the truth of that being, its fundamental mode of being in the world and of attaining its good. Eco-anarchism respects profoundly the *logos* of the *oikos*, its immanent order and self-development, and seeks to defend it from every *arche*, or form of domination. Eco-anarchism is thus a form of *communitarianism* in the strongest sense of the term. It recognizes that we are members of communities within communities. Our *oikoi* include the primary intimate community of the family and small circle of close friends. They include our local and regional communities, both human and more-than-human. And they include, finally, and most importantly, the *oikos* of all *oikoi*, our global household, our home planet, Earth.

In view of the severity of the crises of humanity and the Earth, a dialectical social ecology must investigate the ways in which we can catalyze, as quickly as possible, the emergence of humane, mutualistic, ecologically responsive institutions and practices in all areas of social life. It sees not only "politics," but all areas of social interaction, including production and consumption, intimate relationships, friendships, family life, child-care, education, the arts, modes of communication, spiritual life, ritual and celebration, recreation and play, and informal modes of cooperation, all to be political realms in the most profound sense. Each is an essential sphere in which we can develop our social being and communal individuality, and which the basis is created for the larger free communitarian reality that is emerging. Such a conception of the political requires that practices and institutions be socially and ecologically regenerative and life-affirming, creative and imaginative, humane in spirit and scale, affirming of difference and diversity, radically decentralized, non-hierarchical, rooted in the particularity of people and place, and based on grassroots, participatory democracy. Creating this new world within the shell of the old must become an urgent necessity rather than a vague aspiration. It is, in fact, already a practical necessity, for if this new, regenerative world does not emerge before the shell of that old one collapses, neither of these worlds will any longer be possible.

It is important to realize that however complex the dialectic of spheres of social determination may be, when we confront the “problem of the transition” there is a certain primacy of the spheres of ethos and imaginary. On the one hand, we (that is, we human beings, not just sectarians) must be able to vividly imagine the reality of the new world. But, on the other hand, we can only do this if many of us are already experiencing that new world in a strikingly powerful and concrete manner, so that it becomes a “living option” for all. It is only this that will make possible our “passage to the act,” our criminal act against the Empire, our act of love for the Earth.

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Herbert Marcuse, “A Note on Dialectic” in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Murray Bookchin, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought” in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley, CA: Ramparts Press, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Significantly, epigenetics further discredits the naïve “acorn into oak tree” model of dialectical development. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Joel Kovel, *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), p. 391 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Holmes Rolston, III, Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World (Philadelphia: Temple University. Press, 1988), p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John P. Clark, “An Introduction to Reclus’ Social Thought” in John Clark and Camille Martin, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Elisée Reclus* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013), pp. 1-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John P. Clark*, The Impossible Community* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013); revised edition from PM Press forthcoming. See chapters 3 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)