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Contributions to the Critique of Political Ecology

A distinctive field of political ecology began to emerge along with the larger ecology movement in the 1970s. As early as 1973, Hans Magnus Enzenberger could undertake a “Critique of Political Ecology.”¹ Today, after several decades of proliferation of ecological, social, and political theories, and of vigorous and often contentious debate between those defending different political ecologies, it is a good time to reconsider the question of what such a critique might entail.

One of the presuppositions of this critique is a coherent conception of the nature of the field that is its object. The etymology of the term “political ecology” is not a bad indication of its meaning as a theoretical practice. It is a field concerned with the relationship between the *oikos*, the ecological household or community, and the *polis*, the human community organized (actually or potentially) to pursue the common good. It is about the *logos* of that relationship, its underlying meaning, structure, dynamics, rationality, and our understanding of that relationship in the most critically incisive, empirically grounded and rationally coherent way possible.

It must be added that the normative dimension of this inquiry is central. The project of political ecology rests on the presupposition that the achievement of an understanding of the relationship between *oikos* and *polis* will result in a resolution of the crisis of humanity in nature and the attainment of a normatively justifiable social and ecological order.

¹Hans Magnus Enzenberger, “A Critique of Political Ecology,” *Politics and Crime* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p. 166.

Needed: A Ruthless, Caring Critique

I would contend that for this critical project to succeed, whatever else it might be (social, socialist, deep, feminist, etc.), it must become as radically dialectical as possible. If this is correct — and this can only be determined by an examination of the results in practice — the tasks of a critique of political ecology become clear.

Most obviously, such a critique will be resolutely guided by a dialectical method of analysis, by dialectical thinking, and by a dialectical sensibility. This implies, first, that it undertake a concerted effort to uncover the ways in which existing political ecology has lapsed into dogmatism — for dogmatism is the absolute negation of all dialectical thought. And secondly, it must recognize the ways in which any aspect of existing political ecological thought has contributed to its common project, it must develop these contributions in dialectical interaction with one another, and it must synthesize them into a more comprehensive and realized, though always still developing, political ecology.

In other words, political ecology must learn to be more open to the truth of each perspective and to the ways in which they are elements of one developing project of social ecological understanding and planetary liberatory transformation. At the same time, it must remain resolutely self-critical, so that the Hegelian dialectical procedure of uncovering the truths of perspectives does not deteriorate into the Hegelian anti-dialectical procedure of finding exactly that truth which will contribute most to reaching some preconceived result.

Such a perspective has rather far-reaching implications in view of the present state of political ecology. For the field is rich in insights waiting for dialectical development and creative synthesis. But it is also widely contaminated by just the kind of ideological thinking and dogmatism that stands in the way of any creative dialectic.

So if I were to typify the dialectical spirit that is needed, I would say that it must be capable of being both ruthless and destructive and also caring and creative. Marx aptly defined the task of dialectics as undertaking a “ruthless critique of all things existing.” Nothing is immune to an annihilating dialectical logic. However, this relentless dialectical spirit is also a playful one. Heavy-handed seriousness and the ego itself get lost in the process of following the game of truth wherever it leads. Moreover, a dialectical sensibility is eminently caring — though this might seem blatantly contradictory to the indomitable critical spirit. But dialectical critique is ruthless precisely because it is caring; it requires a tender solicitude for the development of beings and

of ideas. The ruthless critique of all that is rigid and constraining is the correlate of the affirmation of all that contributes to life, growth and creative expression.

Or as Blake says in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” “Damn. braces: Bless relaxes.”

Ideology in Political Ecology

Let’s begin with the ruthless, damning part. Georges Gurvitch describes “the true task of the dialectical method” as “the demolition of all established and crystallized concepts” and contends that the method “must be essentially anti-dogmatic, that is, it must eliminate any preconceived philosophical or scientific commitments.”² This is a precise description of the radical implications of dialectics and indicates the magnitude of its challenge not only to the thinking but also to the character structure of anyone who adopts a dialectical perspective.

Dialectics is about overcoming blockages to the flow of thought and the movement of concepts. These blockages exist on at least four levels. The first is the 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 level is that of social ideology, in which categories and conceptual schemes designed to legitimate and facilitate the operations of a social order distort experience and limit one’s concepts. The third level is that of more particular social groups, institutions, and tendencies within a society in which group ideology (including that of dissident and oppositional groups) and one’s attachment to such ideology create false consciousness. 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. All these levels are inseparable and mutually determining.

A dialectical critique of political ecology will examine the ideological distortions and dogmatism stemming from any of these sources. Some rather general ideological elements of contemporary ecological thought have already received considerable discussion. For example, the adoption of the ecosystem model and especially the concept of the climax ecosystem as a moral and metaphysical norm has been widely questioned as an uncritical expression of modernist utopian

²Georges Gurvitch, *Dialectique et Sociologie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1962), p. 20.

ideology and as exhibiting a reactive anti-technological stance. More recently, a one-sided emphasis on chaos and a doctrinaire rejection of any systemic analysis has been criticized as a reflection of the post-modernist, relativistic ideology of late capitalist consumer society.

Similar problems can be seen as more specifically characteristic of contemporary political ecology. Levins and Lewontin point out that “in bourgeois thought change is often seen as the regular unfolding of what is already there,” a problem that also occurs in radical theory when “the dynamic view of history as a history of class struggle is replaced by the grand march of stages.”³ This tendency is also seen in political ecology, as in deep ecological theories that focus on a rather unproblematic and asocial “self-realization.” It is also seen in social ecological theories that see dialectic as a quasi-Aristotelian unfolding of potentiality under suitable conditions, in which the “tendency” and “directionality” even of very complex systems of ideas and social phenomena are merely “educated” in a rather contrived and simplistic manner.

Such approaches are symptomatic of a problem that is endemic to political ecology: the neglect for the negative. Kovel points out that what he calls a “wholly positive holism” is “unable to grasp human reality and society and is the key to the social obtuseness manifested by many ecological movements.”⁴ Radical political ecology frequently exhibits this problem when it fails to transcend the limitations of the ecosystemic and balance of nature models, especially in formulating its “holistic” personal, social and ecological ideals. This applies, for example, to conceptions of an “ecological self” that is one-sidedly and eco-platonically defined as “a harmonious balance” or “harmonious synthesis.” Similar flaws appear in visions of future ecological communities which, in an eco-Rousseauistic manner, can attain perfect expressions of the general will through ideal collective voting procedures, and whose wills can then be harmonized universally through a purely voluntary consensus. Such problems, which betray a lapse into a dualistic idealism and a neglect of the untranscendable nature of negativity, have afflicted much of political ecology (especially some versions of social ecology, deep ecology, bioregionalism, and neo-primitivist ecology) on many levels.

³Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 276.

⁴Joel Kovel, “Ecological Marxism and Dialectic,” *CNS*, 6, 4, December, 1995, p. 35.

Dogmatism in Political Ecology

Even more disturbing than these ideological limitations of political ecology is widespread evidence of its decline into entrenched sectarian dogmatism. Indeed, a “war of the ecologies” has often raged. I use the term “war” advisedly, in view of its connotations of belligerence and strategic destructive activity. This dogmatism is expressed in such symptoms as the blatant misrepresentation of views that are attacked, quoting of opponents out of context, scholarship as a marshalling of evidence in defense of established and rigidly-held positions, and a Manichaeian division of theorists and their followers into camps of allies and enemies.

In this “war of the ecologies,” arguments are always at cross-purposes. This means more than that they involve contradictions, for contradiction is what stimulates healthy dialectical development. Rather, there is a dogmatic, reactive rejection of opposing views, an inability to recognize the complexity of the positions of others, and perhaps worst of all, what I would call a “mining” method of scholarship. When using this method, one explores texts exclusively to discover valuable materials that can be usefully exploited for one’s ends. The living organic nature of thought is dealt with quite brutally in this highly mechanized enterprise.

The fruits of this war are quite disheartening. Thus, one finds some social ecologists attacking eco-feminism as reactionary for consigning women to an idealized version of the domestic sphere, and for supposedly rejecting reason and evidence in the name of intuition and feelings. Yet, it is difficult to find a single significant ecofeminist theorist who holds any such views. One finds irrational and often ignorant attacks by some social ecologists and socialist ecologists on what they parody as “mystical ecology.” Ironically, these attacks are often made in the name of “rationalism” by critics who have achieved a rational understanding of neither the philosophical positions they attack nor the phenomenon of mysticism to which they compare such views. One finds sweepingly generalized attacks on all of socialist ecology, in the name of (again ironically) an “inclusive democracy.” Yet this “inclusivism” excludes from consideration any formulation of socialist ecology other than a discredited bureaucratic centralism or a tepid social democratic reformism that completely capitulates to capitalist global domination. And to take one more of many possible examples, one finds some deep ecologists dismissing socialist and social ecologists in general as mere “anthropocentrists” who have no ecological consciousness and seek cynically to manipulate ecological movements for limited political ends.

Toward a Dialectical Political Ecology

In succumbing to such ideology and dogmatism, political ecology inevitably fails to be dialectical. No simple characterization can answer the question of what it would mean for it to be fully dialectical, but no one has come any closer than Adorno did in describing dialectics as “the consistent sense of nonidentity.”⁵ This approach must guide us in our explorations of the mutually interpenetrating worlds of nature, society and subjectivity. Yet, political ecology has neglected a number of areas related to all of them. Some examples may be helpful.

One is the question of selfhood and the dialectical critique of subjectivity, an area that must be a central focus if we wish to overcome ideology and dogmatism. As Hegel saw, the dialectical path begins when one faces death, that is, when one realizes the contingency of the ego and the relativity of ego boundaries, the non-identity and the constructed nature of the conventional self. Hegel defines this as the awakening of spirit, but one might equally see it as an opening up to fully relational being. Ecofeminist thought has developed the analysis of subjectivity in this direction. Salleh notes that “it is through crisis and moments of nonidentity that [a woman] glimpses new meanings in her situation, a hidden political potential behind what is given,” and calls this process a “negative dialectic” in which “the positives of perception — immediate facts” lose their self-evident and absolute qualities.⁶ This analysis is noteworthy for its focus on dialectical *experience*, as distinguished from dialectical *analysis*.

Marx inquired into what we produce through our labor and pointed out that from a dialectical perspective the answer is that we create a great many things (systems of production, distribution, and consumption, a class system, our own exploitation, etc.), but the most notable reality that we produce through our productive activity is ourselves. In this spirit we need to remember that when we create political ecology we express and also recreate a self — and the extent to which our mode of self-expression and self-formation remain merely implicit is a measure of political ecology’s inadequately reflective, non-dialectical nature.

Another large area that has been neglected, particularly in Anglo-American political ecology, is the realm of cultural creation and the

⁵Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 5.

⁶Ariel Salleh, “Nature, Woman, Labor, Capital: Living the Deepest Contradiction,” *CNS*, 6, 1, March, 1995, p. 35.

imaginary. There has been little reflection on the degree to which the social imaginary establishes boundaries that limit the scope of political ecology and the critique of the dominant order. Political ecology has made considerable advances in the analysis of ecological problems and at least in its more radical forms has grasped the gravity of ecological crisis, the structural basis of the crisis, and the need for fundamental political, economic and cultural change. Yet in many ways there has been a regression on the crucial question of the institutional formation of consciousness.

Three decades ago, thanks largely to the efforts of Frankfurt School critical theory and the Situationists, issues of the shaping of consciousness, the culture industry, and the social imagination were becoming increasingly central to radical social thought. But today (with some notable but rather marginalized exceptions) we seem very far from Marcuse's insight that there is 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."⁷ The crucial insights of Debord and Adorno are not developed in a concrete, material way but rather seem for the most part lost somewhere in the limbo of postmodernist popular culture history. Today one is much more likely to hear the term "cultural studies" than "cultural revolution," "cultural creation," or even "cultural critique."

A dialectical political ecology needs to undertake a careful analysis of the place of the imaginary in creating social ecological reality and recognize the politics of the imagination as central to the project of social transformation. Accordingly, it must devote much more attention to the absolutely crucial question of the possibilities for moving beyond astute analysis of social and ecological problems and effective refutations of opposing views, to the project of creating socially embodied, material forces that are capable of transforming consciousness. To put it in unfashionably dramatic terms, it needs to think about unleashing the forces of the imagination.

Toward a Dialogue of Ecologies

What I am proposing is a sort of translation into theoretical terms of two basic green injunctions: "Don't waste!" and "Conserve!" The various ideological blockages and dogmatisms that have been mentioned result in a profligate squandering of insights, as they are ignored,

⁷Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic" in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. x.

rejected or distorted in various ways, thus keeping them in sterile isolation from one another. The challenge is to bring these insights into fertile, creative interaction, so that what they have to offer can be conserved in the process of growth, development and dialectical unfolding. In other words, we need to create a “conservation movement” that is a movement of *Aufheben*.

Consider the many areas in which various political ecologies have already made important contributions. Socialist ecology and world systems theory offer insights concerning the analysis of value, globalization, crisis theory (encompassing economic, political, cultural, psychological, and ecological dimensions), the critique of ideology, the interaction between conditions, forces and relations of production, and core-periphery relations. Social ecology has made contributions in such areas as the critique of the state and political power, techno-bureaucratic domination, theories of democratization, and the analysis of the system of hierarchy and domination. Ecofeminism presents insights concerning embodied practice and forms of consciousness, the critique of patriarchy, the relational self, and the ethics and politics of care. Deep ecology and related tendencies raise important issues concerning the critique of anthropocentrism, intrinsic value, intrinsic good and ethical value theory. Cultural ecology, including bioregional theory, raises important questions regarding language, the imaginary, social creativity, ethos, regional realities, the sense of place, and cultural situatedness. Neo-primitivism, post-Situationism and related forms of eco-anarchism present challenging ideas concerning the technological system, the spectacle, and the mass society of commodity consumption. And this brief summary is very far from exhausting even the most general areas in which important work has taken place, and which cannot be neglected by any comprehensive dialectical political ecology.

The project of confronting these theories and their diverse insights with one another in a fully critical yet constructive and synthesizing manner has only just begun. In short, from a critical dialectical standpoint there is an abundance of promising and exciting work to be done in political ecology. In subsequent columns in *CNS*, I hope to draw attention to theories and research that contribute precisely to this project.