

# Capitalism Nature Socialism

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## Another look at the end of the world

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Walter Contreras Sheasby and Derek Wall, in a recent issue of CNS, praise Joel Kovel's book *The Enemy of Nature* (1) as "a penetrating look at the political and theoretical crises of the international left" (2). Our study group read and discussed Kovel's book over several months last year, and we have a rather more critical view of it. We see ourselves, like Kovel, as both socialists and greens, and deeply admire his decades of commitment to the struggle for social and ecological justice. But precisely for this reason, we think it's important to contest much of his analysis from a sympathetic perspective.

### We have several principal arguments with Kovel's book:

- Its scientific basis is weak, marked by selective borrowing from sources which are often speculative, elitist or both. This is particularly important in his discussions of entropy and of the possibilities of solar energy, and in the philosophical sections.
- The basis for his catastrophism – the argument that capitalism must "Grow or Die" – comes down to the psychology and world-view of "The Men in Charge", ignoring the countervailing tendencies of both popular struggles and the efforts of capitalist governments to rationalize the system.
- The accomplishments of the labor movement demonstrate that despite the interests and desires of capitalists, progress toward social justice is possible; a red-green movement can and should join with labor and seek to do the same in the ecological realm.
- The movement for ecological socialism cannot be built up on the fear of apocalypse. It must be based on achievable struggles for social and environmental justice.

### Picking and Choosing from Science

Kovel's use of science to make his case is quite selective. The sources he cites are extremely varied; some are scientific journals and books, but many are mainstream magazines and newspapers, and lots of others are Web sites, sometimes quite obscure. For example, critical points in the argument are based largely on secondary and

tertiary references such as Rachel's Environmental and Health Weekly.

Even more questionable is the use of the limits-to-growth argument of Meadows et al. and the elite Club of Rome, first published in 1972 and updated twenty years later (3). This argument, based on giant computer models of the planet which assumed continued exponential growth ad infinitum, has been the object of severe criticism – by Third World scholars, by environmental justice activists, by scientists, and by those who are all three –yet Kovel accepts its basic premises as if they continue to be valid.

Some of Kovel's borrowings from science are questions of interpretation, but others are real howlers. His ascribing the enormous biodiversity of the Amazon Basin to indigenous peoples' agriculture preventing gene pool mixing (4) is contradicted by a simple knowledge of chronology: the Amazon's biodiversity has been high for millions of years, and shows no sign of having increased in the last several millennia, while human habitation of the region dates back only about 10,000 years.

The point is not to catch the author in factual errors, nor to take an uncritical, accepting stance toward all that "science teaches us". We ourselves have often critiqued the capitalist basis of modern science and the resulting ideologies of biological determinism and pseudo-objective positivism. But if one is serious about this kind of analysis, one can't just pick and choose, citing scientific "discoveries" when they buttress one's argument, and ignoring them otherwise. Whether we are facing "The End of the World", as Kovel puts it, is not just a theoretical question, but also an empirical one, which means that getting the scientific evidence right really does matter.

In this connection, Kovel's invocation of entropy production as the harbinger of ecocatastrophe, drawn from Georgescu-Roegen's writings, is both familiar and highly misleading (e.g., "Here the dark angel is the thermodynamic law, where mounting entropy appears as ecosystemic decay" (5); for a critique of Georgescu-Roegen and his followers see Schwartzman (6)). While Kovel recognizes that the Earth's surface and its technosphere are not isolated to energy fluxes, particularly from the sun, thereby undermining the prophecy of inevitable decay (7) he repeats Georgescu-Roegen's argument that solar energy is not viable: "Other modalities [to fossil fuels and nuclear], principally the vaunted solar alternative, are simply too diffuse and too expensive to concentrate to serve the needs of contemporary society, much less one that continues to grow according to the plan of capitalist elites." (8) He cites Sarkar's claim (9), supporting Georgescu-Roegen, that solar development will continue to be parasitic upon fossil fuels for the foreseeable future. Similarly, recent claims have been made by others that present solar technologies lack the necessary efficiency required for a transition fast enough to slow down global warming significantly in this century (10). But in their modeling, these authors assume the IPCC "business-as-usual" economic assumptions (i.e., relatively unconstrained market capitalism). A revealing caveat is stated: "There is no doubt that long-term economic projections are unreliable, as they cannot anticipate unforeseen technological or socioeconomic revolutions." (11) Socioeconomic revolutions indeed.

The critical obstacles to a rapid "soft" path are plausibly more political-economic than technological. Even existing solar technologies are likely adequate but not sufficient for a conversion to solarized global economy, with a critical obstacle being the dedication of the present and near future US regimes to prolonging a petroleum-based global empire under US military/corporate hegemony.

Some solar technologies (e.g., wind turbines) are already competitive with fossil fuels and nuclear in many regions (Midwest U.S., Germany, Denmark etc.), even without including the externalities of non-renewables (12). Land use requirements of present technologies are large but not inconceivable (e.g., silicon photovoltaic modules on a land area 140 x 140 km, far less than used for U.S. military installations, could generate the entire U.S. electricity requirements) (13). We can anticipate even higher efficiencies in the near future (e.g. plastic and window photovoltaics retrofitted on existing infrastructure), with much shorter times needed to pay back the energy invested in their implementation, thereby enabling net energy generation and the end of fossil fuel parasitism (14). If governments subsidized these technologies as they have and still do for oil and nuclear technologies, the solar transition would be much more robust. This is a central challenge to ecosocialists, to effect the demilitarization (consider the colossal waste of energy and resources by the military industrial complex) and solarization of the global economy.

Kovel's borrowings from science are basically an empirical issue, for which one can cite evidence and compare assertions with data. His use of philosophy is quite another thing. Here, the problem is simply understanding what he is trying to say.

Take these sentences (15): "So the category of existence is occupied by the 'some-things' that exist. These comprise beings insofar as they internalize their existence, that is, make their 'is-ness' part of themselves. In this way, every-thing has being insofar as it is not other-things. This 'being of beings' relates to and to a degree incorporates the other-things, making them internal to itself even as they become objects."

Now, perhaps we're just atheoretical empiricists lacking the necessary background in twentieth-century philosophy, but we can't make hide nor hare out of this.

This is too bad, because, as other sections of *The Enemy of Nature* illustrate, Kovel can actually write quite eloquently. His chapter on the Bhopal disaster (pp. 28-50) not only conveys the horror of the event, but convincingly links it to the accumulation of capital and O'Connor's "Second Contradiction of Capitalism." Although relying often times on singular events or conjecture, Kovel provides alarming examples of how the poor of the world are suffering from environmental repercussions that result from environmental abuse brought on by capitalist conditions. We only wish that the clarity of these examples carried over into the philosophical passages.

### **Capitalism's Growth, Humanity's Death**

Kovel clearly foresees that if capitalism continues, it will lead to a worldwide catastrophe. The arrogance, greed and total disregard for the ecosystem's wellbeing that capitalism fosters will likely not be tempered or moderated to any significant degree, according to Kovel, without implementing basic changes in the way our society views its place in the world (16). Capitalism, according to Kovel, is an ever expanding enterprise that consumes all that it can with no regard for the effects it has on the ecosystem or its inhabitants, unless profits (for a select few) are hindered.

The subtitle of Kovel's book foresees "the end of the world", and he doesn't seem to mean it simply as a metaphor. As he says, "for us, the relevant question is whether the capitalist order will pass away before it causes humanity to pass away"(17). This viewpoint colors his interpretation of all sorts of events, so that in the Introduction, describing a severe drought that affected the Catskill Mountains where he lived in 1988, he asks, "Was the drought a fluke of the weather, or, as I was coming to think, was it a tolling bell, calling us to task for a civilization gone wrong? The seared vegetation now appeared a harbinger of something quite dreadful, and a call to action." (18)

Well, as he admits a few sentences later, it does seem to have been a fluke of the weather: "...nothing that severe has occurred since. But I had for some time been disposed to take a worst-case attitude with respect to anything having to do with the powers-that-be...." (19). And for Kovel, everything has to do with the powers-that-be.

His predictions of catastrophe, as with others in the past, are based on capitalism's ineluctable tendency to "Grow or Die", an assumption cogently criticized a decade ago by Blair Sandler (20). A fundamental Marxist distinction makes clear that what tends to grow under capitalism is not material input or output or even the economy's total use-value, but rather exchange-value. This distinction breaks the link between economic growth and environmental impact. The capitalist economy can grow by mining more coal and burning it up, in process producing polluted streams, black lung, smog, acid rain and greenhouse warming. But it can just as well grow by producing more software, plays, wind power or insurance – commodities whose production, whatever the social good or harm they may do, is not going to exhaust the planet's resources or make our environment totally unlivable.

The need for capital to expand in a material, not just a monetary or metaphorical sense, thus comes down for Kovel to "The Men in Charge." (21) Their psychology and world-view is what makes them anti-ecological, and the capitalist system cultivates this orientation within the ruling class. "To succeed in the capitalist marketplace and rise to the top, one needs a hard, cold, calculating mentality, the ability to sell oneself, and a hefty dose of the will to power. None of these traits is at all correlated with ecological sensibility or caring ....." (22) Thus "the problem is that capital selects for such passions as are recklessly eco-destructive, particularly the desire to win at all

costs.” (23)

This may well be the dominant personality type of the ruling class, but capitalists do not always get what they want. The error here is to ignore the contradictions and countervailing tendencies in the system: the struggles of popular movements, the conflicting interests of different capitalist entities (e.g. oil vs. insurance companies on the issue of global warming), and the efforts of governments faced with these struggles and conflicts to rationalize capitalist competition. Since Kovel assumes that capital reproduction is inherently unsustainable, he ignores countervailing forces in the context of this reproduction that would tend to generate more ecologically sustainable forms of production. For example, the depletion of natural resources and increased pollution may increase the value of commodities and costs of production and thus favor shifts of investment to greener capital, particularly under the pressure of class struggles to create a stronger environmental regime (24). Theory alone, therefore, cannot justify the prediction of ecocatastrophe.

### **The Analogy with Labor**

Another way to see the weakness of Kovel’s apocalyptic vision is to consider the analogy between the environmental and labor movements. Modern Marxism recognizes that unions have been successful in improving the lives of working-class people in many countries and in many ways. The eight-hour day, the 35-hour week, weeks of paid vacation, safer workplaces, universal health care, family leave – these and many more achievements of workers’ struggles have come about despite the tendency of capitalism to favor lower-cost companies and anti-worker attitudes in those who run them. Obviously, we recognize that capitalists attempt to reverse these gains, especially in places and periods like that of the current U.S. The point is simply that labor can and has made gains, despite the contrary desires of capitalists.

When considering the status of labor, the left no longer considers it necessary to insist that things will constantly get worse for workers, or that unions can’t ever be successful in improving conditions. Yet for environmental questions, Kovel seems to see it as reformist to think that green movements can have successes under capitalism. Why the difference? Is it something fundamental, or is it merely a reflection of the current, weakness and capitalist leadership of environmentalism?

Kovel’s apocalyptic analysis ignores class struggles as a factor that has shaped the modes of capital reproduction in its history. What is the potential for creating a real environmental regime, analogous to a social economic regime (e.g., shorter work week, occupational safety, etc. (25)) for this reproductive process on a global and national basis? To what extent can a movement with an ecosocialist agenda forge coalitions with the organized working class and with oppressed intellectual and managerial strata, and even temporary or long term alliances with sectors of national and transnational capital to deepen and expand social governance of production and consumption? Here’s where some Leninist insights may be relevant to the tactical and strategic politics of neutralizing the main currents of capital and their transnational instruments such as the World Bank and IMF, to create space for Kovel’s “communities of resistance” while engendering real sustainability in the global economy. What are the necessary conditions for such coalitions and how can ecosocialists foster their consolidation? How can U.S. capital and its military arm, arguably the preeminent foe of global sustainability, be checked by other nation states and nongovernmental movements (a challenge surely highlighted by the invasion and occupation of Iraq)? What is the relation of the Green parties of the U.S. (of which Kovel is an active member) and other countries to the politics of ecosocialism, now and in the foreseeable future in this age of capital globalization? Virtually none of these questions are addressed in Kovel’s discourse, which unfortunately lacks the necessary concreteness to be translated into real politics.

While he acknowledges the need to struggle for the “democratization of the state”(26), which would presumably entail increasing social and environmental constraints on the reproduction of capital, the imperative for this struggle is simply stated without further elaboration. Throughout the book his deep pessimism with respect to the likelihood of success of such an outcome is evident (e.g., “The very fluidity sought by capital imposes ever greater demands that profits be realized right away or sooner. This is the main reason why nothing substantial will be done about global warming under the present regime.” (27)). But the political and economic victories of organized labor show that even under capitalist domination, progress is possible.

## **Ecosocialism: Built on Hope, Not Fear**

Our basic disagreement with Kovel is not about the goal – replacing capitalism with ecosocialism – but about how to build a movement to reach it. We agree that current "green" or "ecology" movements are largely reformist and can at best only attempt to curtail the ravaging effects that capitalism is producing on the quality of life (on a personal level as well as on a global level) in the US and in the world. There is, however, a necessity for resorting to reformist measures to address crises under the present capitalist condition, such as the escalating health care disaster now underway (28). This is true even though at some point short-term, stop-gap measures will have to be abandoned. Stopping the ecological damage requires massive social change, and the current liberal environmental, ecological and regulatory movements help more to prolong than to eradicate the escalating misery that we witness. Sooner or later they will have to be replaced with a movement for fundamental changes that seek to address the problem at its core: the greed and general disregard for the human condition engendered and necessitated by capitalism. We see the necessity to form an international ecosocialist movement as a countervailing force to transnational capital. Perhaps we are seeing this movement in embryo at the annual World Social Forum meetings in Porto Alegre (29).

On this point, we are in wholehearted agreement with Kovel: “Ecosocialism will be international or it will be nothing” (30). But we do not see the fear of an apocalypse as either ecologically likely or politically helpful in building this movement (31). Hope, not fear, is the best inspiration for a society in which both social and ecological justice will finally come to pass. The left should be able to move beyond the point of view that always equates "more pessimistic" with "more radical" when it comes to the environment, just as we already have with respect to working-class struggles. Pessimism doesn't necessarily inspire political commitment to change --- it can just as easily inspire cynicism and apathy. Ultimately, the optimist vs. pessimist argument about whether this is truly "the end of the world", is simply the wrong question. The best motto remains that of Romain Rolland and Antonio Gramsci: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will".

### **Footnotes**

1 Kovel, Joel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (New York, Zed Books, 2002)

2 Sheasby, Walter Contreras and Derek Wall, *The Enemy of Nature and the Nature of the Enemy*, *CNS*, 13, 4, December 2002, pp. 155-166

3 Meadows, D., D. Meadows, J. Randers and W. Behrens, *The Limits to Growth* (London, Earth Island, 1972), Meadows, D., D. Meadows, and *Beyond the Limits* (London, Earthscan, 1992)

4 Kovel, op. cit, pp. 108-110

5 *Ibid.*, , p. 143

6 Schwartzman, D.W., Introduction to the Special Issue on Marxism and Ecology (as guest editor) and Solar Communism, *Science and Society* 60, 3, Fall, 1996, pp. 261-265 and pp. 307-331 respectively .

7 Kovel, op. cit., pp. 214-215

8 *Ibid.*, , p. 158

9 Sarkar, S., *Eco-socialism or eco-capitalism?* (London, Zed Books, 1999)

10 Hoffert, Martin Iet al., Advanced technology paths to global climate stability: energy for a greenhouse planet, *Science* 298:981-987, 2002; Caldeira, Ken, et al., Climate sensitivity uncertainty and the need for energy without CO2 emission, *Science* 299: 2052-2054, 2003

11 Caldeira et al., op. cit.

12 Sawin, Janet, Charting a new energy future, in Worldwatch Institute, State of the World 2003 (W.W. Norton, Washington, 2003)

13 Golob, Richard and Eric Brus. The Almanac of Renewable Energy. (Henry Holt, New York: 1993)

14 Sawin, Janet, op. cit.

15 Kovel, op. cit., p. 92 (italics and hyphenation in the original)

16 See also Hertsgaard, Mark, Earth Odyssey: Around the World in Search of our Environmental Future. (Broadway Books, New York, 1999)

17 Kovel, op. cit., p. 104

18 Ibid., p. vii

19 Ibid.

20 Sandler, Blair, Grow or Die: Marxist theories of capitalism and the environment, Rethinking Marxism 7, 2, pp. 38-57, 1994.

21 Kovel, op. cit., pp. 76-81

22 Ibid., p. 78

23 Ibid. p. 80

24 Vlachou, A., Nature and value theory. Science and Society 66, 2, pp. 169-201, 2002; Sandler, op. cit.,; Schwartzman, op. cit.

25 Sandler, op. cit.

26 Kovel, op. cit., p. 242

27 Ibid., pp. 80-81

28 M. Gregg Bloche, The Privatization of Health Care Reform: Legal and Regulatory Perspectives (Oxford University Press, New York, 2003); Laurie Garrett, Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health, (Hyperion Press, New York, 2000)

29 <http://www.worldsocialforum.com/>

30 Kovel, op. Cit., p.234.

31 See also Doug Boucher, Not with a Bang but a Whimper, Science and Society, 60, 3, Fall, 1996.

Note: the formatting of references is slightly different from the published version (first then second name of author). A few typos have been corrected, hopefully no new ones introduced.