

From Murray Bookchin, 'Open Letter to the Ecology Movement' in Toward an Ecological Society

(Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980)

Ecology, in my view, has always meant social ecology: the conviction that the very concept of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human, indeed, of women by men, of the young by their elders, of one ethnic group by another, of society by the state, of the individual by bureaucracy, as well as of one economic class by another or a colonized people by a colonial power. To my thinking, social ecology has to begin its quest for freedom not only in the factory but also in the family, not only in the economy but in the psyche, not only in the material conditions of life but in the spiritual ones. Without changing the most molecular relationships in society—notably, those between men and women, adults and children, whites and other ethnic groups, heterosexuals and gays (the list, in fact, is considerable) - society will be riddled by domination even in socialistic 'classless' and 'non-exploitive' form.

It would be infused by hierarchy even as it celebrated the dubious virtues of 'people's democracies', 'socialism' and the 'public ownership' of 'natural resources'. And as long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction.

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

This identity and this goal is now faced with serious erosion. Ecology is now fashionable, indeed, faddish - and with this sleazy popularity has merged a new type of environmentalist hype. From an outlook and movement that at least held the promise of challenging hierarchy and domination have emerged a form of environmentalism that is based more on tinkering with existing institutions, social relations, technologies, and values than on changing them. I use the word 'environmentalism' to contrast it with ecology, specifically with social ecology. Where social ecology, in my view, seeks to eliminate the concept of the domination of nature by humanity by eliminating the domination of human by human, environmentalism reflects an 'instrumentalist' or technical sensibility in which nature is viewed merely as a passive habitat, an agglomeration of external objects and forces, that must be made more 'serviceable' for human use, irrespective of what these uses may be. Environmentalism, in fact, is merely environmental engineering.

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

Nathan Glazer's 'ecological' twenty-four square-mile solar satellite, O'Neil's 'ecological' spaceships, and the DOE's giant 'ecological' windmills, to cite the more blatant examples of this environmentalist mentality, are no more 'ecological' than nuclear power plants or agribusiness. If anything, their 'ecological' pretensions are all the more dangerous because they are more deceptive and disorienting to the general public. The hoopla about a new 'Earth Day' or future 'Sun Days' or 'Wind Days', like the pious rhetoric of fast-talking solar contractors and patent-hungry 'ecological' inventors, conceal the all important fact that solar energy, wind power, organic agriculture, holistic

health, and 'voluntary simplicity' will alter very little in our grotesque imbalance with nature if they leave the patriarchal family, the multinational corporation, the bureaucratic and centralized political structure, the property system, and the prevailing technocratic rationality untouched.

Solar power, wind power, methane, and the geothermal power are merely power insofar as the devices for using them are needlessly complex, bureaucratically controlled, corporately owned or institutionally centralized. Admittedly, they are less dangerous to the physical health of human beings, but they are clearly dangerous to the spiritual, moral and social health of humanity if they are treated merely as techniques that do not involve new relations between people and nature within society itself. The designer, the bureaucrat, the corporate executive, and the political careerist do not introduce anything new or ecological in society or in our sensibilities toward nature and people because they adopt 'soft energy paths', like all 'technowits' (to use Amory Lovins' description of himself in a personal conversation with me), they merely cushion or conceal the dangers to the biosphere and to human life by placing ecological technologies in a straightjacket of hierarchical values rather than by challenging the values and the institution they represent... Ecology is being used against an ecological sensibility, ecological forms of organization, and ecological practices to 'win' large constituencies, not to educate them. The fear of 'isolation', 'futility' and 'ineffectiveness' yields a new kind of isolation, futility and ineffectiveness, namely, a complete surrender of one's most basic ideals and goals.

'Power' is gained at the cost of losing the only power we really have that can change this insane society—our moral integrity, our ideals, and our principles. This may be a festive occasion for careerists who have used the ecology issue to advance their stardom and personal fortunes; it would become the obituary of a movement that has, latent within itself, the ideals of a new world in which masses become individuals and natural resources become nature, both to be respected for their uniqueness and spirituality.

An ecologically-oriented feminist movement is now emerging and the contours of the libertarian anti-nuke alliance still exist. The fusing of the two together with new movements that are likely to emerge from the various crises of our times may open one of the most exciting and liberating decades of our century. Neither sexism, ageism, ethnic oppression, the 'energy crisis', corporate power, conventional medicine, bureaucratic manipulation, conscription, militarism, urban devastation or political centralism can be separated from the ecological issue. All of these issues turn around hierarchy and domination, the root conceptions of a radical social ecology.