– CHAPTER 7 –

Social Ecology and Environmental Justice

Present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without . . . dealing with problems within society.

—Murray Bookchin

Introduction

In public discussion of environmental issues, one often gets the impression that the interests of human beings conflict with the interests of the rest of life. To put the matter crassly, it's jobs for loggers vs. habitat for spotted owls. Such apparent conflicts exist around the world. Ramachandra Guha (see below) gives the example of tiger reserves in India, where in order to preserve the large sections of contiguous wild habitat necessary for the survival of the endangered tiger, Indian peasants are being forced off their land and are forbidden to enter the forest from which they have derived sustenance for millennia. It would seem that the conflict is real.

But is it? The readings in this chapter argue that our overall interests coincide with those of other living things, and that the reason for the apparent conflict lies with the faulty organization of human society. As Murray Bookchin, the father of social ecology, puts it: "nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems," and hence ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without addressing those underlying social problems.

Bookchin rejects the dichotomy between human beings and the rest of nature. Anthropocentric thinkers make this dichotomy when they claim the right to dominate nature. But biocentric thinkers make it too, he says, when they put the interests of humans on a level with those of bacteria, or even speak of human beings as a virus infecting the planet. The fact is that human beings are part of nature. Like the rest of life on earth, we compete/cooperate with other organisms for survival. What differentiates us from other species is "second nature," in other words, the cultures that our naturally evolved abilities enable us to create. Culture makes it possible for us to affect our environment faster than the ecosystem can assimilate those changes. So second nature, says Bookchin, while it has natural roots, "contains both the danger of tearing down the biosphere and, given a further development of humanity toward an ecological society, the capacity to provide an

entirely new ecological dispensation." If we overcome the cancers of hierarchical social structures and of unchecked economic growth that now infect our cultures, the second of these two possibilities is within our grasp.

Social ecology is a powerful viewpoint within environmental philosophy. The field would be poorer and less interesting without its insights. But as the pages of this anthology make plain, relations between social ecologists and other environmental philosophers have sometimes been stormy. Deep ecologists accuse social ecologists of anthropocentrism, while social ecologists accuse deep ecologists of being both superficial and antihuman. Murray Bookchin in particular was as polemical as he was brilliant and insightful. More recently, others who identify themselves as social ecologists, like the philosopher John Clark (1998), have sought constructive dialogue with other environmental thinkers.

The interview with Robert Bullard and the essay by Guha and Martinez-Alier are less theoretically oriented than that of Bookchin. They are aimed at the intersection of social justice issues and environmental issues in particular cases. Bullard focuses his attention on the unequal distribution of environmental costs, which disproportionately end up in the backyards of the poor and people of color. Over the past few years, a grassroots environmental justice movement has grown up to challenge these inequities in the United States (from which Bullard draws his examples) and around the world. The "in the first person" contribution from MacArthur Award–winning neighborhood activist Majora Carter of Sustainable South Bronx presents a recent example of what disadvantaged communities can accomplish for themselves and for the environment.

A major source of environmental injustice is the actions of large multinational corporations. Guha and Martinez-Alier give examples of the way in which large international corporate interests have marginalized and squashed the interests and knowledge of indigenous peoples, as well as impoverishing them, cutting them off from their traditional livelihoods and making many of them hopelessly dependant on the whims of multinational corporations.

It remains to be seen whether the "environmentalism of the poor" can find a sufficiently powerful voice to alter these patterns.

Reference

Clark, John. 1998. A social ecology. In *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, eds. M. Zimmerman, J. B. Callicott, G. Sessions, K. Warren, and J. Clark, 416–40. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

What Is Social Ecology?—Murray Bookchin

We are natural beings, says Murray Bookchin, whose "second nature" (culture) is the only reason we are out of synch with the rest of nature. To address ecological problems successfully, we must address our social problems.

According to Bookchin, two fundamental problems now permeate what second nature has produced. Unless they are addressed, we can expect them to produce ecological disaster. The first is "the hierarchical mentality and class relationships that so thoroughly permeate society." These "give rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world." The second, which came with the rise of capitalism, is the impersonal market imperative of "grow or die." According to social ecologists, these two problems are the source of most poverty and oppression in the world, and they are also the primary sources of the

ecological crisis. The interests of the majority of humanity, as well as the interests of the rest of life, require that they be addressed.

The solution to these problems espoused by social ecologists, especially Bookchin, is to turn away from big business and large political structures and shift power to more locally based and environmentally aware social groups. Bookchin favors a confederated network of municipalities. Each municipality would be intimately related with the ecosystems in which it is located, and all together would negotiate solutions to those environmental and social issues that are truly global in nature. Bookchin thinks such an arrangement would both advance the cause of freedom and bring in a new era of ecological health.

Throughout this essay, Bookchin distances himself (often sarcastically) from what he considers to be false solutions to the ecological crisis.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ECOLOGY?

Murray Bookchin

What literally defines social ecology as "social" is its recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Conversely, present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within society. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today—apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes.

If this approach seems a bit too "sociological" for those environmentalists who identify ecological problems with the preservation of wildlife, wilderness, or more broadly, with "Gaia" and planetary "Oneness," it might be sobering to consider certain recent facts. The massive oil spill by an Exxon tanker at Prince William Sound, the extensive deforestation of redwood trees by the Maxxam Corporation, and the proposed James Bay hydroelectric project that would flood vast areas of northern Quebec's forests, to cite only a few problems, should remind us that the real battleground on which the ecological future of the planet will be decided is clearly a social one.

Indeed, to separate ecological problems from social problems—or even to play down or give token recognition to this crucial relationship—would be to grossly misconstrue the sources of the growing environmental crisis. The way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to addressing the ecological crisis. Unless we clearly recognize this, we will surely fail to see that the hierarchical mentality and class relationships that so thoroughly permeate society give rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world.

Unless we realize that the present market society, structured around the brutally competitive imperative of "grow or die," is a thoroughly impersonal, self-operating mechanism, we will falsely tend to blame technology as such or population growth as such for environmental problems. We will ignore their root causes, such as trade for profit, industrial expansion, and the identification of "progress" with corporate self-interest. In short, we will tend to focus on the symptoms of a grim social pathology rather than on the pathology itself, and our efforts will be directed toward limited goals whose attainment is more cosmetic than curative.

While some have questioned whether social ecology has dealt adequately with issues of spirituality, it was, in fact, among the earliest of contemporary ecologies to call for a

sweeping change in existing spiritual values. Such a change would mean a far-reaching transformation of our prevailing mentality of domination into one of complementarity, in which we would see our role in the natural world as creative, supportive, and deeply appreciative of the needs of nonhuman life. In social ecology, a truly natural spirituality centers on the ability of an awakened humanity to function as moral agents in diminishing needless suffering, engaging in ecological restoration, and fostering an aesthetic appreciation of natural evolution in all its fecundity and diversity.

Thus social ecology has never eschewed the need for a radically new spirituality or mentality in its call for a collective effort to change society. . . . Although this idea, expressed at times as an appeal for the "respiritization of the natural world," recurs throughout the literature of social ecology, it should not be mistaken for a theology that raises a deity above the natural world or that seeks to discover one within it. The spirituality advanced by social ecology is definitively naturalistic (as one would expect, given its relation to ecology itself, which stems from the biological sciences), rather than supernaturalistic or pantheistic.

To prioritize any form of spirituality over the social factors that actually erode all forms of spirituality raises serious questions about one's ability to come to grips with reality. At a time when a blind social mechanism, the market, is turning soil into sand, covering fertile land with concrete, poisoning air and water, and producing sweeping climatic and atmospheric changes, we cannot ignore the impact that a hierarchical and class society has on the natural world. We must earnestly deal with the fact that economic growth, gender oppressions, and ethnic domination—not to speak of corporate, state, and bureaucratic interests—are much more capable of shaping the future of the natural world than are privatistic forms of spiritual self-regeneration. These forms of domination must be confronted by collective action and major social movements that challenge the social sources of the ecological crisis, not simply by personalistic forms of consumption and investment that often go under the rubric of "green capitalism." We live in a highly cooptative society that is only too eager to find new areas of commercial aggrandizement and to add ecological verbiage to its advertising and customer relations.

Nature and Society

Let us begin, then, with basics—namely, by asking what we mean by nature and society. Among the many definitions of nature that have been formulated over time, one is rather elusive and often difficult to grasp because it requires a certain way of thinking—one that stands at odds with what we popularly call "linear thinking." This form of "nonlinear" or organic thinking is developmental rather than analytical, or, in more technical terms, dialectical rather than instrumental. Nature, conceived in terms of developmental thinking, is more than the beautiful vistas we see from a mountaintop or in the images that are fixed on the backs of picture postcards. Such vistas and images of nonhuman nature are basically static and immobile. . . .

I mean to define nonhuman nature precisely as an evolving process, as the totality, in fact, of its evolution. This encompasses the development from the inorganic into the organic, from the less differentiated and relatively limited world of unicellular organisms into that of multicellular ones equipped with simple, later complex, and presently fairly intelligent neural apparatuses that allow them to make innovative choices. Finally, the acquisition of warm-bloodedness gives to organisms the astonishing flexibility to exist in the most demanding climatic environments. This vast drama of nonhuman nature is in every respect stunningly wondrous. It is marked by increasing subjectivity and flexibility and by increasing differentiation that makes an organism more adaptable to new environ-

mental challenges and opportunities and renders a living being more equipped to alter its environment to meet its own needs. . . .

Humans are highly intelligent, indeed, very self-conscious primates, which is to say that they have emerged—not diverged—from a long evolution of vertebrate life-forms into mammalian, and finally, primate life-forms. They are a product of a significant evolutionary trend toward intellectuality, self-awareness, will, intentionality, and expressiveness, be it in oral or body language.

Human beings belong to a natural continuum, no less than their primate ancestors and mammals in general. To depict them as "aliens" that have no place or pedigree in natural evolution, or to see them essentially as an infestation that parasitizes a highly anthropomorphic version of the planet (Gaia) the way fleas parasitize dogs and cats, is bad thinking, not only bad ecology. Lacking any sense of process, this kind of thinking—regrettably so commonplace among ethicists—radically bifurcates the nonhuman from the human. Indeed, to the degree that nonhuman nature is romanticized as "wilderness," and seen presumably as more authentically "natural" than the works of humans, the natural world is frozen into a circumscribed domain in which human innovation, foresight, and creativity have no place and offer no possibilities.

The truth is that human beings not only belong in nature, they are products of a long, natural evolutionary process. Their seemingly "unnatural" activities—like the development of technology and science, the formation of mutable social institutions, of highly symbolic forms of communication, of aesthetic sensibilities, the creation of towns and cities—all would be impossible without the large array of physical attributes that have been eons in the making, be they large brains or the bipedal motion that frees their hands for tool making and carrying food. In many respects, human traits are enlargements of nonhuman traits that have been evolving over the ages. Increasing care for the young, cooperation, the substitution of mentally guided behavior for largely instinctive behavior—all are present more keenly in human behavior. The difference between the development of these traits among nonhuman beings is that among humans they reach a degree of elaboration and integration that yields cultures or, viewed institutionally in terms of families, bands, tribes, hierarchies, economic classes, and the state, highly mutable societies for which there is no precedent in the nonhuman world—unless the genetically programmed behavior of insects is to be regarded as "social." In fact, the emergence and development of human society is a shedding of instinctive behavioral traits, a continuing process of clearing a new terrain for potentially rational behavior.

Human beings always remain rooted in their biological evolutionary history, which we may call "first Nature," but they produce a characteristically human social nature of their own which we may call "second nature." And far from being "unnatural," human second nature is eminently a creation of organic evolution's first nature. To write the second nature created by human beings out of nature as a whole, or indeed, to minimize it, is to ignore the creativity of natural evolution itself and to view it one-sidedly. If "true" evolution embodies itself simply in creatures like grizzly bears, wolves, and whales—generally, animals that people find aesthetically pleasing or relatively intelligent—then human beings are literally denatured. In such views, whether seen as "aliens" or as "fleas," humans are essentially placed outside the self-organizing thrust of natural evolution toward increasing subjectivity and flexibility. The more enthusiastic proponents of this denaturing of humanity may see human beings as existing apart from nonhuman evolution, thereby dealing with people as a "freaking," as Paul Shepard puts it, of the evolutionary process. Others simply avoid the problem of humanity's unique place in natural evolution by promiscuously putting human beings on a par with beetles in terms of their "intrinsic worth." In

this "either/or" propositional thinking, the social is either separated from the organic or flippantly reduced to the organic, resulting in an inexplicable dualism at one extreme or a naive reductionism at the other. The dualistic approach, with its quasi-theological premise that the world was "made" for human use is saddled with the name of "anthropocentricity," while the reductionist approach, with its almost meaningless notion of a "biocentric democracy," is saddled with the name of "biocentricity."

The bifurcation of the human from the nonhuman reveals a failure to think organically and to approach evolutionary phenomena with an evolutionary way of thought. Needless to say, if we are content to regard nature as no more than a scenic vista, mere metaphoric and poetic description of it might suffice to replace systematic thinking about it. But if we regard nature as the history of nature, as an evolutionary process that is going on to one degree or another under our very eyes, we dishonor this process by thinking of it in anything but a processual way. That is to say, we require a way of thinking that recognizes that "what-is" as it seems to lie before our eyes is always developing into "what-it-is-not," that it is engaged in a continual self-organizing process in which past and present, seen as a richly differentiated but shared continuum, give rise to a new potentiality for a future, ever-richer degree of wholeness. Accordingly, the human and the nonhuman can be seen as aspects of an evolutionary continuum, and the emergence of the human can be located in the evolution of the nonhuman, without advancing naive claims that one is either "superior to" or "made for" the other.

By the same token, in a processual, organic, and dialectical way of thinking, we would have little difficulty in locating and explaining the emergence of the social out of the biological, of second nature out of first nature. It seems more fashionable these days to deal with ecologically significant social issues like a bookkeeper. One simply juxtaposes two columns—labeled "old paradigm" and "new paradigm"—as though one were dealing with debits and credits. Obviously distasteful terms like "centralization" are placed under "old paradigm," while more appealing ones like "decentralization" are regarded as "new paradigm." The result is an inventory of bumper-sticker slogans whose "bottom line" is patently a form of "absolute good versus absolute evil." All of this may be deliciously synoptic and easy for the eyes, but it is singularly lacking as food for the brain. . . . Social ecology seems to stand alone, at present, in calling for the use of organic, developmental, and derivative ways of thinking out problems that are basically organic and developmental in character. . . .

Social ecology calls upon us to see that nature and society are interlinked by evolution into one nature that consists of two differentiations: first or biotic nature, and second or human nature. Human nature and biotic nature share an evolutionary potential for greater subjectivity and flexibility. Second nature is the way in which human beings as flexible, highly intelligent primates inhabit the natural world. That is to say, people create an environment that is most suitable for their mode of existence. In this respect, second nature is no different from the environment that every animal, depending upon its abilities, creates as well as adapts to, the biophysical circumstances—or ecocommunity—in which it must live. On this very simple level, human beings are, in principle, doing nothing that differs from the survival activities of nonhuman beings—be it building beaver dams or gopher holes.

But the environmental changes that human beings produce are significantly different from those produced by nonhuman beings. Humans act upon their environments with considerable technical foresight; however, lacking that foresight may be in ecological respects. Their cultures are rich in knowledge, experience, cooperation, and conceptual intellectuality; however, they may be sharply divided against themselves at certain points

of their development, through conflicts between groups, classes, nation states, and even city-states. Nonhuman beings generally live in ecological niches, their behavior guided primarily by instinctive drives and conditioned reflexes. Human societies are "bonded" together by institutions that change radically over centuries. Nonhuman communities are notable for their fixity in general terms or by clearly preset, often genetically imprinted, rhythms. Human communities are guided in part by ideological factors and are subject to changes conditioned by those factors.

Hence human beings, emerging from an organic evolutionary process, initiate, by the sheer force of their biology and survival needs, a social evolutionary development that profoundly involves their organic evolutionary process. Owing to their naturally endowed intelligence, powers of communication, capacity for institutional organization, and relative freedom from instinctive behavior, they refashion their environment—as do nonhuman beings—to the full extent of their biological equipment. This equipment now makes it possible for them to engage in social development. It is not so much that human beings, in principle, behave differently from animals or are inherently more problematical in a strictly ecological sense, but that the social development by which they grade out of their biological development often becomes more problematical for themselves and nonhuman life. How these problems emerge, the ideologies they produce, the extent to which they contribute to biotic evolution or abort it, and the damage they inflict on the planet as a whole lie at the very heart of the modern ecological crisis. Second nature, far from marking the fulfillment of human potentialities, is riddled by contradictions, antagonisms, and conflicting interests that have distorted humanity's unique capacities for development. It contains both the danger of tearing down the biosphere and, given a further development of humanity toward an ecological society, the capacity to provide an entirely new ecological dispensation.

Social Hierarchy and Domination

How, then, did the social—eventually structured around status groups, class formations, and cultural phenomena—emerge from the biological? We have reason to speculate that as biological facts such as lineage, gender distribution, and age differences were slowly institutionalized, their uniquely social dimension was initially quite egalitarian. Later it acquired an oppressive hierarchical and then an exploitative class form. The lineage or blood tie in early prehistory obviously formed the organic basis of the family. Indeed, it joined together groups of families into bands, clans, and tribes, through either intermarriage or fictive forms of descent, thereby forming the earliest social horizon of our ancestors. . . .

From everything we know about the socialization of the biological facts of kinship, age, and gender groups—their elaboration into early institutions—there is no reason to doubt that people existed in a complementary relationship with one another. Each, in effect, was needed by the other to form a relatively stable whole. No one "dominated" the others or tried to privilege itself in the normal course of things. Yet with the passing of time, even as the biological facts that underpin every human group were further reworked into social institutions, so the social institutions were slowly reworked at various periods and in various degrees, into hierarchical structures based on command and obedience. . . .

Hierarchy in its earliest forms was probably not marked by the harsh qualities it has acquired over history. Elders, at the very beginnings of gerontocracy, were not only respected for their wisdom but often beloved of the young, and their affection was often reciprocated in kind. . . .

In any case, that gerontocracies were the earliest forms of hierarchy is corroborated by their existence in communities as far removed from each other as the Australian