The emergence of a radical "green" movement in Australia, argues Trevore Blake, poses a fundamental challenge to all socialists. While socialists have many lessons to learn from the new politics of the environmentalists, the converse is also true. Socialism can offer a valuable political analysis of economic power so often lacking among the environment movement.

Radical environmentalism, especially in its "green" or "ecological" form, represents a fundamental challenge to socialism, which socialists may ignore at their political peril. Yet, I would suggest, the converse is also true. Unless socialists can come to terms with the ecological critique of industrial society, even a successful socialist transformation could, at best, offer an ameliorated, though ultimately unsustainable, permutation of the present. Unless environmentalists can come to terms with the socialist critique of capitalism and confront strategic centres of political-economic power, they will be resigned to marginal utopian initiatives and issue-oriented reformist challenges. Moreover, the organisational and political capacity of labour to resist its own exploitation is of vital significance to the related struggle against environmental exploitation.

The environment is not something "out there" that can be ignored with impunity. It is not simply the object of a fashionable middle-class preoccupation with wildlife, wilderness, urban amenity and historic buildings. Although these things are important, they are aspects of broader issues involving the capacity of environments to sustain both human activities and other species, as well as cultural values associated with environments. Environmental issues therefore encompass questions of human well-being and safety, the ecological viability of human activities over the long term, deeper aspects of meaningful human experience, and the "rights" of other species. They must become central concerns of the left.

Political Economy of Environment

There is a growing perception within the left that the dependence of the Australian economy on capital-intensive, export-oriented resource and agricultural industries, and increasingly automated manufacturing industries, is incompatible with the achievement of full employment and a stable, balanced economic structure. The recent development of these industries has relied heavily on state infrastructure and subsidies supplied at the expense of wage and salary earning taxpayers, diverting funds from potentially more productive social purposes. Initiatives of ALP governments in stimulating some revitalisation of manufacturing activities, expanding service sector employment, and developing more democratic structures for economic management, have offered the prospect of limited amelioration.

However, the dominance of the economy by transnational corporations and international finance capital represents a basic constraint upon a transition to a more equitable, democratic and viable society. Furthermore, much current economic activity is unsustainable ecologically. The mining, forestry and agricultural industries in Australia are, in many areas at least, rapidly depleting the material basis of their existence, generating serious environmental degradation and destroying the remaining natural heritage of this continent, while many manufacturing industries are promoting wasteful production, generating toxic and carcinogenic hazards as well as other safety hazards.

Current economic strategies will not prevent an increase in the ranks of the unemployed and poor over the medium-term, and the associated effects will generate increasingly serious and closely related ecological, economic and social crises. Moreover, while much of our manufacturing industry has been lost to south-east Asia, the role of Third World countries as suppliers of heavily exploited labour and natural resources to "developed" countries is threatened by even more serious ecological pressures — for example, the depletion of fish, forest and mineral resources, soil erosion, climatic disruption and toxic pollution — the social impacts of which are suffered by the subordinate classes. And, of course, military rivalries, heightened by resource scarcities, pose the most serious threat, at a sub-continental or even global scale.

Undoubtedly, the environmental issues of most immediate concern to different social classes in "developed" industrial societies, and "developing" or "marginalised" Third World societies, vary markedly. Yet, it is subordinate classes which invariably suffer the brunt of environmental distress — loss of productive resources, inadequate food, clothing and housing, diverse threats to health, and destruction of cultural heritage. Similarly, the
gender bias of social power and the division of labour means that environmental conditions experienced by men and women are often very different.

Ecosocialism Versus Green Radicalism

To a substantial degree, the issues surveyed in the preceding section can be readily encompassed by an ecosocialist critique of contemporary capitalist — and state-socialist — societies. The general thrust of this critique is to the effect that transformation of both current political-economic structures and technologies is essential if a more equitable, less alienating and ecologically sustainable society is to be realised. The extension of worker and community control over production is regarded as necessary in overcoming alienation and meeting social needs, while encouraging environmentally sensitive practices.

So long as production is geared toward either private or state accumulation of capital, ecosocialists argue, vital social needs will remain unfulfilled and ecological conditions will be undermined. Moreover, the political-economic dynamic of capital accumulation is reflected culturally in a psychically repressive, anti-ecological consumerism, which denies a range of creative and enriching possibilities in social life. The ecosocialist approach is demonstrated, in some degree at least, by the “green bans” of the BLF, and by the work of organisations such as Environmentalists for Full Employment, which have developed a critique of current socio-economic and technological structures and strategies and put forward alternative strategies based on both ecological and socialist principles.

Even if socialists embrace the ecosocialist framework, green radicalism goes somewhat further in its ecological critique of industrialism and its proposals for an “ecological society”. While ecosocialism tempers the predominant socialist enthusiasm for development of the “forces of production”, greens see this enthusiasm — shared by both capitalist and state-socialist ideologies — as symptomatic of a fundamental cultural, psychological or spiritual repression. This repression is manifested as an inability to apprehend our human status as organic elements within the broader natural domain, closing off vital aspects of human experience in a submission to cultural materialism and utilitarianism, failing to acknowledge the intrinsic value of other living things, clinging to a mechanistic, materialist world view. The associated preoccupation with material production and consumption, class interests and politics, tends to displace awareness of the subtler dynamics of gender remain unexplored, aggressive, competitive behaviour is legitimated, and different ways of thinking and feeling, loving and living are repressed: in short, the emergence of a more profound mutuality and co-operation is frustrated.

The green perspective thus provides an organic synthesis of certain convergent views within the feminist, environmental and peace movements. It is strongly anarchist in orientation, emphasising the need for participatory as opposed to hierarchical modes of social organisation, and spatial decentralisation — for ecological as well as organisational reasons. Yet it links localist and global perspectives through an emphasis on the moral responsibility of the affluent, industrialised world to share natural resources and assist the poor of the Third World to overcome their oppression and to develop their productive capacities to meet social needs. Ecologically and socially appropriate, small-scale technologies are seen to be vital if people are to gain control over their own social existence and achieve a harmony with their environment and, indeed, themselves. Thus, the green movement is closely connected to the anti-nuclear and alternative technology movements, as well as the communal lifestyles, community co-operatives and alternative health and spiritual growth movements, while avoiding the insularity and political conservatism commonly encountered within some of the alternative lifestyle movements. Greens stress the links between personal lifestyle choices — for example, the need to enhance household and community self-sufficiency — and the structures which shape and constrain those choices, and therefore the broader project of political, economic and cultural transformation.
Conflict or Co-operation?

It is quite apparent that, although many socialists have been active in the environmental, anti-nuclear, peace and feminist movements, a major gulf separates the socialist mainstream from the emerging green coalescence — even if ecosocialists are well represented in the Green parties of Western Europe and the embryonic Australian parties. This tension is manifested in the fact that two major gatherings designed to promote radical social change in Australia are to be held simultaneously in Sydney during Easter 1986. While the Broad Left Conference aims to extend the dialogue and links between various elements of the established left and other “progressive social forces”, the Getting Together Conference aims to forge connections between people involved in diverse “alternative movements” under a green umbrella. Although discussions between the respective organisers have been held to arrange some limited interaction, the view that the two gatherings are not in competition seems sadly misplaced — certainly from a radical ecosocialist perspective.

The sources of tension between socialists and greens are obviously complex. At one level there is frequent socialist disdain for the apparent middle-class, romantic self-indulgence of many environmentalists, who are seen to be preoccupied with “quality of life” issues far removed from the seemingly more elementary concerns and mundane experiences of the more subjected segments of the working class. Yet, from another perspective, most environmentalists might be seen to be part of the working class, being alienated from ownership or control of the means of production. Nevertheless, greens are frequently antagonistic towards the apparent economistic-class conceptual fetishism and rigidity of much marxian analysis which is seen as obscuring crucial aspects of social and ecological realities, and thereby encouraging repressive political consequences — especially when associated with vanguardist, authoritarian structures and strategies.

My own view is that a critical synthesis of marxian political economy and the green approach to human ecology is both feasible and necessary. However, some marxian theoretical constructs will have to be recognised as having finite interpretative value, rather than providing an objective means of understanding the essential dynamics of social life. Ecosocialism goes much of the way toward reconciling marxian and ecological perspectives, but there are vital elements of the green approach, informed especially by ecologically-inspired, feminist psychological, social and political analysis, and underlaid by an emerging “holistic” understanding of the relationship between humans and non-human nature, which provide the foundation for a more critical perspective and appropriate praxis. It is also essential that greens overcome their aloofness from the immediate practical concerns of the working class and the struggles of the labour movement.

A progressive greening of the left is vital and, at least in the form of ecosocialism, this is well within the bound of political feasibility. A more broadly-based, strategic red and green alliance is also feasible and urgently needed if we are to confront and transform the disastrous path of social development currently being pursued in Australia. The task for both socialists and radical environmentalists, then, is to examine the longer-term mutuality of interests of the working class and the encompassing issue of ecological sustainability so that collaborative practical and political responses may be forged.

“The green perspective thus provides an organic synthesis of certain convergent views within the feminist, environmental and peace movement.”

Only if the fragmentation of social movements seeking progressive social change can be substantially overcome, through the formation of a radical alliance, will a real momentum for change be possible. It is crucial to recognise the extensive convergence or complementarity of the basic concerns of those movements working toward a more humane society — a more equitable, less alienating, participatory and ecology-respecting future.

Practical Priorities

A variety of practical links have been and are currently being forged between the socialist and environmental movements, as well as a range of other social movements. Activities which warrant
concerted action to extend their scope include:
(i) Dialogue to consider the areas of convergence and tension between the perspectives and interests of different movements and to formulate broadly-based strategies for change, in relation to both short-term and long-term objectives (e.g. regional, state and national forums or networks might be established to respond to different political issues; one of the proposals to be considered by the Getting Together Conference will be a People’s Congress);

"A major priority must be the collaborative formulation of alternative plans for economic development ...."

(ii) Collaborative research to enable a critique of the social and environmental consequences of current structures and strategies and to formulate alternative strategies for both state policies and grassroots initiatives (e.g. this might occur in relation to particular economic sectors and industries, as well as geographic regions; high priorities would be the metals and petrochemical industries, and the timber and energy industries in different states); (iii) Commitment of resources to worker/community controlled co-operative ventures which meet social needs, create satisfying work (not necessarily paid), protect the environment, and contribute to the gradual reduction of the power of corporate interests (e.g. supported by reformist governments, union-based funds and community banks; this strategy might combine elements of market socialism and an “alternative” economy); and (iv) Co-ordinated political action through parliamentary, industrial and community-based grassroots channels to challenge and transform reactionary state policies and bureaucratic and paternalistic practices, and direct substantial resources towards co-operative worker and community initiatives, as well as curtailing the power of corporate interests and instituting more democratic structures within the residual capitalist sector.

Planning for the Future

A major priority must be the collaborative formulation of alternative plans for economic development, management and outputs, for different sectors of economic activity and geographic regions, together with the organisation of concerted political action to realise such plans. A number of initiatives of this type have occurred in recent years and, indeed, are currently in progress, for example in the Hunter and Wollongong regions in NSW, in Tasmania and in Melbourne. ALP programs for negotiated industry development agreements, as well as regional planning strategies, offer significant potential for leverage in this regard.

Alternative plans need to aim to:
(i) Generate opportunities for satisfying work for all who want it and especially women, young people, marginalised ethnic groups and disabled people;
(ii) Meet vital social needs necessary for the improvement of people’s well-being (for example, providing community support to relieve women of the burden of domesticity);
(iii) Overcome structural and geographic inequalities;
(iv) Minimise health and safety hazards;
(v) Ensure ecological sustainability and a high degree of self-reliance;
(vi) Establish democratic forms of ownership and management; and
(vii) Avoid contributing to the exploitation of the people or resources of the Third World.

Such planning activities should involve the collaboration of workers, local community groups, environmentalists and other interested people. The challenge is to establish democratic structures and processes which are responsive to the concerns and experiences of people involved in different movements or areas of activity, especially at the local or regional level, to explore the relationship between their perspectives, and then, with varying degrees of collaboration, initiate appropriate practical and political strategies. Linking of the labour, feminist and environmental movements is essential for the formulation of alternative plans, co-ordinated political action, and the establishment of practical initiatives. A vigorous momentum for radical change towards a more humane future may then be achieved. If substantial interaction between people involved in different movements occurs, the Broad Left Conference and the Getting Together Conference will provide an ideal opportunity to stimulate such a momentum.

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