L.S. Do you think the ecology movement will become more or less class-based in the future?

Prof. Chesneaux:
Many people consider ecology a bourgeois issue. It’s not. Environmental decay affects working and middle classes. The middle classes have become aware of ecological problems earlier than the workers, but that’s true of most issues and only illustrates the ideological oppression of the working class. There are both working class and middle class solutions to ecological problems. So far, the middle class have tended to control the issues, with their compromise tactics, but the fact that they have, to date, been predominant does not make it a purely middle class issue.

L.S.: Could you outline the differences in approach and in solutions that distinguish working class from middle class ecological action?

Prof. Chesneaux:
The reformist approach emphasises protection of nature by and for those
who can afford week-end cottages in the country, at the coast, etc. It emphasises middle class comforts and use of leisure based on individual escapism. The explanation of the ecological crisis typical of this approach puts the burden on individual guilt, not on the nature of the economic system. It is a non-political approach which suggests that if only every human being was more ecologically conscious we would have no ecological crisis. The reformist style is to work through negotiations and committee work rather than to use direct action. Because reformists are optimistic about the machinery of the bourgeois state, the courts, etc., they believe that all that's needed is more information. So they compile more and more technical, scholarly books. These reformist tactics leave genuine radicals defenceless because the reformists are co-opted by the government and the bureaucracy. They open foundations, publish journals, and so on. All of which slows down the actual tackling of the crisis, keeps the debate within the confines of the capitalist system and strengthens and enlarges the bureaucracy by giving it more money. 'There is cash in all that trash', as an American businessman said. So, the ecology issue must be rescued from reformists and conservatives.

L.S.: How can radicals best do this?

Prof. Chesneaux:
A radical analysis of the issue leads to the conclusion that pollution is a by-product of capitalism, a society based on profit and expansion. 'Stationary capitalism' is a contradiction in terms. Reinvestment is basic to capitalism. The ecology crisis is an indictment of the capitalist system. Radicals must work to increase awareness of this analysis of the nature of the crisis. In practice, the revolutionary struggle must question the whole society and bring those involved in ecology into contact with the nature of the capitalist system. True radical ecological action will lead to conflict with all organs of the established order; bureaucracy, courts, police, etc. Radicalisation should evolve from ecological involvement.

L.S.: What are the theoretical underpinnings for a radical analysis of 'the ecological crisis'?

Prof. Chesneaux:
The nature of the crisis can be understood within the theory of the contradictions of capitalist society. But we need to go beyond Marx's writings. Marx did write in Vol. 1 of CAPITAL that capitalism is progress in the art of destroying the worker and impoverishing the land, that capitalism exhausts both land and worker, the basic sources of wealth. But Marx didn't dwell on or emphasise this problem. Why? Partly because eighteenth and nineteenth century thought had stressed the domination of man over nature and the idea that there was an unlimited supply of nature at man's disposal. Partly because it wasn't necessary in Marx's time to explore the way capitalism exhausted and exploited the land. Emphasis was on exploitation of workers. Marxist thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries therefore developed in a distorted way. It saw a mechanical relationship between the three levels of social life, the productive forces, the mode of production and the ideological superstructure, and emphasised the irresistible power of the productive forces. This led to a fetishism for unlimited growth, obvious in the practice of the USSR and post-Soviet socialist states. USSR rivers are just as polluted as American rivers because of concern with growth as an end in itself rather than with selective growth. The French Communist Party is also imbued with this productivist mentality, this insistence on freedom of expansion for productive forces. But we must now see the relationship between productive forces and socialist economics in a different way -- the relationship between man and nature should be seen as dialectical, rather than as one of dominance.

L.S.: Do we need a 'new socialism'?

Prof. Chesneaux:
There's a new contradiction today in capitalism. It cannot survive without expansion. But resources are finite. Therefore unlimited growth is not only
unnecessary but harmful. So a definition of socialism more appropriate to our time would stress that collective control of the means of production is not enough. We need a society where man can control his own future. This obviously requires the abolition of private profit. But that’s not enough. We must have a society of selected growth which assesses ‘progress’ in the light of available resources. This differs from the technocratic concept of zero growth, in which the rich are OK, but the poor lose out. China has attempted to see things differently. Social needs are not seen in terms of individual advantage. There is collective use of TV, collective means of transportation, etc. and nothing is left unused. Have a look at the Chinese delegate’s statement to the Stockholm environmental conference.

L.S.: What future developments are likely in the ecology movement?

Prof. Chesneaux:
Ecology as a movement is part of the political struggle against capitalism. It is a ‘people’s issue’ rather than a working class or middle class issue. It must combine with other crisis areas of society which are in acute struggle — women, aborigines, workers. Overlap of issues is important and makes the movement more dynamic and powerful. We must explore the potential links with the working class, counter-culture, peace movements, etc.

L.S.: What relationship to, and relevance for, the poor countries does the ecology movement have?

Prof. Chesneaux:
Our working class is certainly privileged relative to the working class of Asia and Africa. The fight against pollution at home may lead to a shifting of the burden to the exploited, under-developed countries. Polluting factories, for example, may be shifted from Europe and the US to poor nations where there’s less awareness of the dangers and less organised resistance. This is a serious problem. But we can’t be defeatist, we can’t slow down the struggle for ‘strategic’ reasons. We must fight, but be prepared for such consequences and act accordingly. The more progress is made in the west in the ecology struggle the more urgent is the need for cooperation with revolutionary movements in Asia and Africa. It’s all connected. For example, Dow Chemicals make napalm and household chemicals. They are destroying nature and people — for profit............ Under-developed countries will soon make the necessary connections between ecology and capitalism, e.g. Malaysians can observe the effects of the tin industry on their earth. So pollution is not just a problem for the rich. It’s a world-wide problem.