THE POLITICS OF ECOLOGY

THE recent Stockholm conference on the environment, which I visited for a few days, illustrated to perfection the evasiveness of orthodox thinking on ecological and related problems. The evasiveness is, of course, inevitable since any thorough analysis of the situation prevailing in the world today is bound, if conducted with an open mind, to reach conclusions not only uncomfortable to, but also unacceptable to, the politicians of the world. The official conference in fact battled might and main throughout its proceedings to banish politics, thus totally nullifying its deliberations. The acrobatics involved in demonstrating the irrelevance of politics to questions of the environment gave rise to the derogatory designation of “circus” to the conference. In this note I should like to open up a discussion on the politics of ecology.

My own interest in the field goes back some 25 years, stemming from an early concern with resource-population problems. The concern arose from a keen desire to see optimum utilisation and exploitation of resources in order to make possible an evening-up of living standards both inside societies and between societies. Few people at that time questioned whether resources were adequate to this challenge (granted that social and economic changes favourable to re-distribution could be achieved in the necessary time-span). Of the handful of people who did query the adequacy of resources, few made much impact — though I remember being impressed in the early 1930’s by Professor Nicol’s prognostications of inanimate energy resources proving an objective limitation on growth. Nor were there many thinkers who foresaw that exponential growth in real resource consumption would ultimately set up major social disutilities in the very process of their extraction and consumption, though we should note the honourable pioneering work of Professor K. W. Kapp.

So unaware were socialists of the inevitable consequences of sustained growth — both in depriving the underprivileged to keep stoking up the process and in generating environmental disutilities — we actually asserted, and attempted to show, that socialist planning would prove more efficient in the proliferation of physical commodities than market capitalism or oligopolistic neo-capitalism! Actually, there is some excuse, since leaders of self-styled “socialist” countries frequently boasted that they would catch up with and eventually surpass the US in production. Looking back over this particular controversy, I feel profound relief at its growing irrelevance, since it was hard work trying to demonstrate the superiority of Soviet-style central planning over capitalism in the proliferation of physical commodities in the face of statistics that showed the opposite — namely a growing gap in per capita GNP as between US and SU, and higher growth rates sustained over longer periods in Japan than in Russia.

As with so much else, the catalyst came with reflection upon the two determining phenomena of our time: the Chinese Revolution and the Vietnamese struggle. The first suggested to those prepared to think about it that the real choice was not between the two hitherto prevailing types of rapid proliferation of physical commodities — the US variety and the SU variety — but between Western-style mechanical instrumentalism and some alternative articulation of the aims, purposes and modalities of development. The second ripped away the benign mask to reveal in all its ruthlessness and rapacity the face of modern imperialism.

It is unnecessary for our present purpose to elaborate upon these assertions, both of which are well documented. C. R. Hensman, among others, has tried to show from a collection of their speeches and articles that third world leaders — across a fairly wide spectrum of political positions — consciously reject both US and SU “models” of development. There is also accumulating evidence that the Chinese leadership has shown, from the assumption of power in 1949, far greater awareness of the problems of social costs and ecological impact than Western, including Soviet bloc, leaders. Many of these questions are to be discussed at an important international conference, being sponsored by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, on “Socialism and the Environment”, due to take place in December in London.

One cannot, of course, over-estimate the profound significance of the Indochina war on all contemporary consciousness. But we should note two things: first, the horrifying and quite deliberate ecoside employed by the Americans in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia — a logical consequence of the run-away development of the chemical and related industries in the US; second, for many people it was pondering upon the origins of the Indochina war and the needs of modern imperialism that drew their attention to real resource scarcities, and by further steps of analysis and reasoning, to a realisation of the real limits to growth implicit in both the scarcities and the gross misdirection of the industrialised
countries along the path of mindless accumulation and pollution.

At this point everything seems to come together and lock into a coherent whole — resources, imperialism, peasant revolution — but we must be content on this occasion only to sort out a few of the discernible strands.

Myriad are the volumes written on so-called "under-development", but few have much of relevance to say. Two of the panelists at the session of the Environment Forum in Stockholm at which I spoke — both were radical Latin American scientists — suggested an interesting line of thinking obviously relevant to the present theme. They argued that environmental degradation of the former colonies began precisely with the imposition of imperialism (e.g. in replacing balanced ecosystems with commercial crop monocultures; in reducing owner-occupier small peasants to the status of rack-rented tenant or landless labourer with consequent neglect of the long-term interests of the soil; careless extraction of timber, oil and other natural resources; etc.). I shall not pursue this line of argument here, however, despite its obvious relevance to the politics of ecology.

Instead, I shall start with the far less well studied and documented phenomenon of "over-development". The word itself is important in directing our attention to the need to think along the lines suggested by the description. Let me suggest possible approaches to the question. We may start with a fairly neutral definition. The conventional approach to development links the process with the depletion of non-renewable resource inputs characteristic of, and documented phenomenon of "over-development".

We should start with levels of per capita consumption of certain non-renewable resources in the rich countries, and find out whether such levels of consumption could be made universal in a world with optimum social arrangements and equality. Obviously, it at once becomes apparent if one undertakes this exercise that the levels of per capita consumption of a whole range of essential non-renewable resource inputs characteristic of, say, the United States, could never, under any circumstances, be generalised to the world's population. Overdevelopment may, therefore, be defined as taking more than a fair share of the world's scarce resources, and thus denying to other countries (the underdeveloped or rather over-exploited) the possibility of attaining equivalent levels of living standards as measured by conventional indices. What we are talking about here, naturally, is imperialism: the flow of non-renewable resources is from the poor countries subjected to neo-colonialism to the metropolitan powers.

We should not, however, overlook the deleterious domestic consequences of overdevelopment. These range from permanent structural unemployment side by side with inflation to what might be called over-dependence (illustrated most simply by recalling the total economic paralysis that gripped the eastern seaboard of the United States when the grid fortuitously failed in November 1965). Much could also be written about the psychological impact of overdevelopment: the selfishness, political apathy, and disturbing prurience and morbid concerns of those shaped by the ideology of material accumulation and sated by the superficial and titillating trivia and considered exploitation of debased tastes on the part of the media.

Another aspect of overdevelopment worth mentioning is that the environmental and ecological problems caused by an all too successful production system cannot even be justified by reference to easing the burden of those most in need of such help. For it is an observable characteristic of modern technology that it helps most those who need help least and helps least those who need help most (e.g. the elderly). Furthermore, its imperatives deprive those in need of help of the comfort formerly afforded by stable social structures and the extended family.

The problem of overdevelopment (and ecological degradation) has arisen in its present critical fashion because certain implicit premises were not brought out into the open and examined. It was assumed that accelerated proliferation of physical commodities would, almost by itself, solve the ages-long problem of poverty. Of course it hasn't (there is still primary poverty in the rich countries today, while globally there are more poor people in the world now than there were before the whole thing started with the industrial revolution). This is where the idea of planning both the production and distribution of goods arose, but the basic unexamined premise remained — namely that it was necessary to produce more and more, and more and more, and... Actually, it is quite in line with both the spirit and letter of Marx's writings to argue that the real point of planning ought to be to achieve liberation from commodities. One can begin to discern in the revolutionary Asian countries an emphasis along this line (writing of her recent visit to China, Clare Hollingworth noted that "there are no refrigerators, no washing-machines, no air-conditioning plants. . . "The Russians like this type of consumer goods", a Chinese official said, 'We do not want or need them'." Daily Telegraph, 6/6/72; emphasis added). An interesting point was made to me when discussing this with a talented British television producer. He suggested that the only test of success in television ought to be whether it is contributing to the ultimate disappearance of television as a medium (i.e. people ought to be gradually liberated from their enslavement to the Box by programmes which
enhance their capacity to think for themselves and fill their own leisure with worth-while activities). The argument is, of course, capable of extension.

I am frequently asked during discussion of the kinds of question raised in this paper what we can do about changing the direction of those ponderously charging run-away dinosaurs, the over-developed countries. (Needless to say, the destinies of the so-called underdeveloped countries may safely be trusted to their own peoples, and our role as regards them is primarily one of hindering and finally helping to halt imperialism from inside, in co-ordination with the liberation struggles outside, the metropolitan walls.) This brings us to the most direct application of the term "the politics of ecology" — namely the actual political possibilities opened up to us by the variety of ecological movements sprouting left, right and centre.

Two possibilities at once suggest themselves. The first is to engage in legitimate, proximate, ad hoc action, such as lending all our strength to stopping Concorde and other such pieces of technological nonsense and nuisance. The second is the more important and longer-run: to use every opportunity while engaging in such immediate actions to politicise the other participants. That is, to show that there cannot be successful treatment without accurate diagnosis, and that accurate diagnosis of the present human crisis must start with the question of imperialism and the organic, symbiotic, relationship between overdevelopment and underdevelopment. Readers will readily conjure up for themselves relevant examples of how this can be done, but let me give you a case arising again out of the Environment Forum in Stockholm. An Iranian doctor made an impassioned speech about DDT, malaria, and poverty in Central America. Of course, there are plenty of conservationists and ecology freaks concerned about DDT, but what this doctor argued was that massive spraying (profitable to the big US companies involved) had produced a situation where progressively more and more obdurately resistant strains of mosquito have appeared, so that the incidence of malaria is now rising. Interesting enough, but it is the next step in the argument that packs the punch. He asked: where has malaria been successfully eradicated? The answer is simple, but crucial: where general living standards have risen. But raising general living standards is, of course, anathema to the modern emperors and their lackeys, while profiting from research and development of yet further chemical pesticides aimed at the adaptable (and winning) mosquito is in accord with whole spirit and concept of modern imperialism. (The doctor in question pointed out further that traditional peasant methods against the debilitating disease of mosquito-borne malaria were quite effective until their social structures, autonomy and will were broken and sapped by the intrusion of neo-colonialism-imperialism.) Obviously, general living standards will not and cannot rise in countries such as those in Central America until there have been successful social revolutions of the Chinese, Korean and Indo-chinese pattern. It is at this point that the liberal conservationist must be put on the spot and made to decide where he ultimately stands (in this case in trying to devise other mechanistic forms of mosquito control profitable to some US or Western industrial interest but ecologically more sound, OR in standing shoulder to shoulder with the liberation struggle for the destruction of imperialism and the giant multi-national corporations for the emancipation of all mankind).

For we must not leave the field to the enemy. There is an ecological crisis, and there are specifically socialist approaches of much greater relevance than the palliatives peddled by the liberal conservationists (not to speak of the destroyers themselves). In thinking about all this, we are being driven to discard from the definition of socialism so many unnecessary encrustations that bear witness only to capricious contingencies in the historical evolution of socialism rather than to its immanent content. Let me end, perhaps provocatively, with three suggestive questions in this respect. Is reduction in per capita possession of physical commodities equivalent to a reduction in standard of living? Beyond a certain point is reduction in actual labour a welfare good? How can population be stabilised without reliance on the (illusory) efficacy of mechanical-instrumental interventions? All three are intimately associated with the possibility of transcending the crisis of ecology — and all three just as intimately associated with the proper definition of socialism.