

Eco-Socialism: An Introduction

Written by Vivian Ike

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Eco-socialism was developed in the 1970s following the rise of the global environmental movement in the 1960s (O'Connor 1998). It was integrated into the IR scholarly discipline by the 1980s as a critical unconventional theory (Saurin 1995). Eco-socialism is critical of capitalism and its intertwined effects on the environment and human welfare. It believes that global environmental degradation is caused by a global exploitative and unequal socioeconomic relationship amongst human beings. Therefore, eco-socialism seeks to transform this global pattern to one that is free from degradation, exploitation, and inequality. This article explores how eco-socialism defines the environment, the negative effects of capitalism on the global environment and human welfare, and how to solve the negative effects.

Eco-socialism also known as 'social ecology' is derived from key thinkers that belong to the Marxist tradition whose attempt is to combine socialist and environmental ideas (Löwy 2021; Saito 2021). This includes popular social theorist Murray Bookchin who formulated and developed the Theory of Social Ecology in the United States as well as American political economist James O'Connor who is known for his famous treatise *Nature Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (O'Connor 1998). There are scholars from other parts of the world and in developing countries like Ariel Salleh an Australian social ecologist and former Professor of international political economy, and Sabrina Fernandes an eco-socialist activist based in Brazil.

When it pertains to the definition of the environment, eco-socialists believe that there is no fixed or one-size-fits-all definition of the environment because what is considered environmental is socially constructed by who is defining it (Saurin 1995, 88). Eco-socialism is therefore critical of the conventional definition of the environment. Conventionally, the environment is defined as consisting of only physical elements such as air, water, and land, as well as living things like plants and animals. According to eco-socialism, this definition neglects that humans are part of the environment.

Eco-socialism believes that humans are part of the environment and should be the principal object of focus in the study of global environmental politics. The environment in of itself has no value, according to eco-socialism (Saurin 1995, 90). Humans are the ones through their social interactions and relationship with nature that give the environment meaning and value (O'Connor 1998, 54). In sum, eco-socialism, defines the environment as the 'human environment.' The human environment encompasses humans and how they interact, affect, and are affected, by the natural and man-made physical surroundings in which they exist, as well as the non-physical immaterial environment shaped by human social interactions such as the social, political, economic, cultural environment that are all connected (O'Connor 1998, 54).

Consequently, eco-socialism emphasises on human agency. Specifically, the shared and diverse social interactions within capitalism that contributes to humans causing global environmental degradation. According to eco-socialism, capitalism is a global structure of wealth accumulation responsible for the systematic and uneven distribution of socioeconomic inequality and environmental degradation globally. This is because capitalism is dependent on both environmental and human resources (O'Connor 1988; Spence 2000). Environmental resources include raw materials and energy sources, including natural sinks such as air, soil, and water that absorb and store wastes and recycle them into new environmental resources. On the other hand, human resources comprise of labor, which include their physical manpower, skills, and intellect. Capitalism privatises and commodifies both environmental resources and

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human resources and uses them to produce goods and exchanges them for profit (O'Connor 1998; Löwy 2021). For example, nature is put at a price and is purchased to be transformed by labour, which in turn is also bought at a price in the form of wages (O'Connor 1998; Spence 2000).

Also, because of the dependence on human labor resources, capitalism entails two main processes. This includes the process of production and the process of exchange. The process of production occurs first and is followed by the process of exchange. Labor (i.e., humans) through their interaction in the processes of production and exchange are involved in a socioeconomic relationship better known as a social division of labor (Saurin 1995). It is during and through the division of labor that environmental degradation occurs and is produced. Labor involved in the process of production are however lower and are more exploited than those laborers that are involved in the process of exchange, which means that there is a hierarchy and inequality in society.

At the process of production which happens at the local level, labor extracts environmental resources from nature and converts them into economically valuable goods, but in doing so they exploit natural resources, pollute, and degrade the environment (Terreblanche 2018). Unfortunately, labor during this process of production do not own the goods of their labor because they can't sell them directly to earn value or to satisfy their needs. Instead, these laborers are paid extremely low wages by the capitalistic owners of production (O'Connor 1998; Spence 2000).

After the process of production comes the process of exchange. During the process of exchange which happens at the global level, the goods produced are sold by another set of laborers who earn slightly higher wages to other laborers who can afford the goods. This process of exchange eventually leads to unequal allocation and distribution of goods, and therefore, causes further inequality among laborers. In other words, it is only those laborers involved in the process of exchange that can afford goods and buy them because they are at the top of the social division of labor, while laborers involved in the process of production are at the bottom and therefore, are usually unable to afford or buy the goods that they produced (Terreblanche 2018).

Additionally, all laborers are fragmented, alienated, and disorganized because natural resources are locally extracted and produced, and then are sold globally at diverse international markets or sites by different laborers who do not know each other (Saurin 1995). For instance, laborers who extract silicon, plastic and copper from the soil used to make electronic devices are different from the labourers involved in the conversion of these resources into laptops and phones and are different from labourers who sell the laptops and phones. These different set of laborers may never know each other or come into contact. The same goes for labourers who grow and extract cotton in Africa that are used to produce clothes that are made by labourers in Asia such as India and China, the clothes are inevitably sold and bought in Western Europe and North America by another set of laborers.

Nonetheless, just as labor involved in the production process exploit, pollute, and degrade the environment, likewise, labor involved in the process of exchange produce pollution and waste in their environment. Although all labor involved in the capitalist production and exchange processes collectively degrade the environment and subsequently, suffer the negative consequences of a degraded environment, they do so albeit unknowingly (Löwy 2021). Moreover, in today's energy and technology intensive global economy, many laborers despite their location in the social division of labor and material welfare are losing their source of livelihood. Technology now substitutes for some of the labor-intensive processes, and therefore, deplete resources and produce waste and pollution at a higher and faster rate than the environmental sinks can absorb and recycle (O'Connor 1998; Saurin 1995).

Capitalism, as a global structure, however, takes credit and makes profits for goods directly produced by labour, but conversely, at the same time, does not take responsibility for its control over the forces of division of labour that produce environmental degradation across the globe (Löwy 2021). Therefore, according to eco-socialism, if capitalism is left unchallenged, the social division of labour whereby goods are produced locally and sold globally will destroy both nature and labor resources in which it is so dependent on (Saito 2021). The removal of capitalism is the solution to both the exploitation of human labor and nature because it will lead all of society across the world to be transformed into a socialist one whereby the process of production and process of exchange will be equally owned and distributed all over the world by humans who value each other and their environment (Löwy 2021). The agency responsible for this transformation is the global environmental movement, which is a collective of humans who are

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also laborers (O'Connor 1988).

The global environmental movement was formed in the 1960's by the need to challenge how capitalism degrades the environment and overexploits labour (O'Connor 1998). The shared suffering of labour and their environment led labourers to form unions and diverse social movements all over the world that challenge the capitalist processes in order to change it into a more equal and just one without exploitation and degradation. However, the global environmental movement is still not yet global in its reach because laborers around the world are still participating in capitalism. Laborers need to be made aware of their shared sufferings as they participate in the processes of production and exchange. They also need to be made aware of how the social division of labor works to create a form of inequality, fragmentation, and alienation among them.

To awaken the collective consciousness of laborers that all social agents are environmental agents (Saurin 1995). This would start by labor unions serving as a source and site of education through campaigns and other forms of union activities that will involve labor unions to expand their reach through forming networks and partnerships with other forms of social movements in their respective locales and other parts of the world like the urban movement, women's movement, peace movement, anti-globalization movement, public health movement, indigenous and farmers movements (O'Connor 1988, 1998; Löwy 2018, 2021). The shared interest in preserving labour and environmental resources by the various social movements in society will result in one global environmental movement with a unified goal to breakdown the capitalist process of production and exchange and the social division of labor that functions at its core.

Until then, the global environmental movement is nonetheless actively working with the international state system to transform capitalist production and exchange conditions to more socially acceptable forms (O'Connor 1988). This only results in piecemeal regulations of the capitalist processes and ephemeral improvements of the social welfare of labor (Saurin 1995). Moreover, states are ineffective for solving labor inequality and environmental problems because they do not do so uniformly. For instance, not all states are willing to regulate capitalism nor are interested in a socialist society, and some of them work with capitalists or depend on capitalism to preserve the state. Therefore, when capitalism is regulated by one state, it is easy for capitalists to move into less regulated states economies to continue their business of degrading the environment and exploiting human labour. In other words, they will always be poor states willing to take on capitalists that can bring in money to their economies at the detriment of the poor people and the environment.

However, the movement of capitalists to less regulated states will only produce social unrest as both nature and labour resources get degraded. Therefore, the variant social movements partnered with the global environmental movement as one will continue to crack down on capitalism in their respective locales and will also do away with states that preserve capitalism in jurisdictions all over the world. After the fall of capitalism including its supporting structures, humane social relations with the environment will be restored and sustained in a manner that fulfils human needs and within the ecological limit of the environment. This utopia is otherwise called an ecosocialist world wherein labour and the environment will live and thrive in harmony. How long the world must wait for such a utopia to occur will conversely remain the fundamental critique of eco-socialism (O'Connor 1988; Spense 2000).

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Dr Vivian Ike is an Assistant Teaching Professor at Syracuse University in New York where she teaches a range of courses including Global Environmental Politics. She is passionate about helping students of International Politics understand the different theoretical approaches on the environment in an accessible way. Her research examines the intersection between public health and environmental policy in the United States, and understanding the intersection between Global Health and Global Environment.