

Review Feature - Perspectives on Eco-Socialism

Written by Hans A Baer

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Review Feature - Perspectives on Eco-Socialism

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HANS A BAER, JUL 14 2019

Facing the Apocalypse: Arguments for Ecosocialism
by Alan Thornett
Resistance Books, 2019

Eco-Socialism for Now and the Future: Practical Utopias and Rational Action
by Robert Albritton
Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

Eco-socialism has been a topic addressed by an increasing number of books in recent years. 2019 has already witnessed the addition of two books to the body of literature. In *Facing the Apocalypse*, Alan Thornett, a former trade union activist in the British automobile industry during the 1960s and 1970s, has written a readable and engaging argument for the need to turn to eco-socialism as a strategy to mitigate climate change. He supports the Red Green Labour network, an eco-socialist current within the Labour Party. Conversely, in *Eco-Socialism for Now and the Future*, the prolific political economist Robert Albritton, a professor emeritus at York University in Toronto, provides a detailed litany of the short-comings of the capitalist world system, but has far less to say about eco-socialism per se than the former.

Facing the Apocalypse

The key motivating factor for Thornett in *Facing the Apocalypse* is his opinion that the left's record on the environment has been 'bleak'. Thornett laments that most left organizations across the world, including socialist and Marxist groups, give scant attention to the ecological crisis, often arguing that they have many other demands upon them. Thornett's stated aim is to provoke discussion about strategies which will better enable the left to play a positive role in the current struggle to avert ecological apocalypse. He begins by covering a lot of material that will be familiar to eco-socialists, namely on planetary boundaries; water issues, agriculture, biofuel production, and urban water consumption; pollution, such as oceanic dead zones, air pollution, and plastic waste; and the 6th extinction of species, which is essential reading for leftists not as familiar with these topics. Turning to how the left can begin to make sense of these issues, Thornett provides an excellent overview of the ecological legacy of both classical Marxism, as exemplified in the work of Marx, Engels, William Morris, and Edward Carpenter, and later leftist thinkers concerned with the ecological crisis, including Scott Nearing, Murray Bookchin, Rachel Carson, Roderick Frazier Nash, Barry Commoner, Raymond Williams and Derek Wall. Shifting to the Global South, he also discusses the indigenous struggle for environmental sustainability as highlighted by the work of Hugo Blanco in Peru, Vandana Shiva in India, and Chico Mendes and Sister Dorothy Stag in Brazil. While the term eco-socialism has only appeared over the course of the past 35 years or so, Thornett makes it clear that eco-socialism draws from a line of thinkers extending back to Marx himself.

In his analysis of the efforts that have been made to address the climate change crisis thus far, Thornett juxtaposes conventional and Global South approaches. In the case of the former, he argues that the Paris Agreement was 'deeply flawed' in various ways, particularly in that it 'was based on non-legally binding pledges to reduce remissions' (pp. 78-29). Nevertheless, while he acknowledges that the Paris Agreement operates within capitalist parameters, he maintains it provides a 'new dynamic from which a new round (or stage) for the struggle could be launched' (p.82). In

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my view this is a little too optimistic. I tend to view the Paris Agreement as a distraction, creating the false sense that the powers-that-be now take climate change seriously. Various analysts have argued that even if all countries were to meet their voluntary reduction targets, the climate is still slated to rise by 2.7 to 3.5 degrees Celsius by 2100. As such, the Paris Agreement fails to carry on the spirit of the 2010 Peoples' Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth drafted in Cochabamba, Bolivia, which was led by indigenous people and recognized the role of global capitalism in exploiting nature, thus contributing to the ecological crisis and climate change. Unfortunately, to date, there appears to be no clear indications that either the earlier People's Conference resolutions or the 2015 Paris Agreement have significantly reversed an on-going increase in greenhouse gas emissions, let alone mount a serious challenge to the growth paradigm of global capitalism that drives this increase.

After laying his foundations by summarizing the various facets of the environmental crisis and laying out the basis for a Marxist position on ecology, Thornett moves on to assessing recent attempts that have been made to further eco-socialism as a political project. The book discusses various eco-socialist developments, but particularly focusses upon the Ecosocialist International Network (EIN), which served as the platform for an eco-socialist manifesto drafted by Michael Lowy and the late Joel Kovel in 2001. He laments that the EIN 'has failed to make progress in recent years, and eco-socialism remains a minority position on the radical left today' (p. 92). Nevertheless, some European parties define themselves as eco-socialist, including the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark, the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Socialist Left Party in Norway, and the Parti de Gauche in France. From my position in Australia, I would also note that the Socialist Alliance, a small party in Australia, defines itself as eco-socialist and publishes the *Green Left Weekly* newspaper. Conversely, Socialist Alternative, the largest socialist group in Australia, does not define itself as eco-socialist. Ringing true in relation to my own national experience, Thornett's argument that too many socialists continue to ignore or at least downplay the environmental devastation created by capitalism, choosing to focus on exclusively on its exploitation of the working class, is a compelling one.

Turning to the question of 'what is to be done' if these eco-socialist currents are to have a greater impact, Thornett draws attention to various matters that need to be urgently addressed, including the need to develop a strategy that forces capitalism to 'make major change in the course of the long struggle for socialism' (p. 100), whether carbon taxes can serve as a radical transitional reform, the Stalinist legacy vis-à-vis environmental degradation, and population growth, with the latter being a contested issue on the far left. While carbon taxes are in my view preferable to emissions trading schemes, thus far most countries that have implemented them, particularly the Scandinavian ones, have not established particularly high carbon prices that have resulted in significant reductions in emissions. In his analysis of population growth, which he defines as an ecofeminist concern, Thornett argues that the 'stabilisation of the global human populations would create a better basis on which to tackle the ecological crisis' (p. 161-162). Any effort to reduce population growth would have to address two issues: (1) improving the overall standard of living among the poorest people in the world, which would require creating an even playing field, and reducing the wealth of the affluent sectors of both developed and developing countries and (2) empowering women and girls by challenging patriarchy on all fronts, including in religious institutions. When considering Thornett's emphasis on the need to address the Stalinist legacy of environmental degradation, it is clear that we must acknowledge that the Soviet bloc countries were forced to play catch-up with developed capitalist countries, particularly the United States, in the context of the Cold War. I personally witnessed this first hand during my stint as a Fulbright Lecturer in the German Democratic Republic, a country which relied on lignite coal for energy production due to short supply of alternative sources. Therefore, it is essential that those who take-on Thornett's call to challenge Stalinist legacies take note of the much changed international context we face today.

In his concluding chapters of the book, Thornett provides an assessment of the environmental struggle in Britain. Notably he praises the progress the Labour Party has made under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, which has pledged support for the Paris Agreement, a new clean air act, banning fracking, renationalizing Britain's energy system, and promoting a renewables industry with unionized labor. Hopefully, however, eco-socialists within the Labour Party can push it beyond a largely ecological modernization agenda that can be incorporated within a green capitalist framework. He appeals to the left, given the gravity of the ecological and climate crises, to 'become far more engaged with the environmental struggle' (p. 222). I could not agree more.

Eco-Socialism for Now and the Future

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Albritton's book is worthwhile reading because it provides us with a detailed litany of the short-comings of the capitalist world system that warrant contemplating an eco-socialist alternative. He reports that the earliest usage of the term *eco-socialism* may harken back to a pamphlet titled *Eco-Socialism in a Nutshell* published in 1980 in Britain by the Socialist Environment and Resources Association. Albritton argues that 'since the publication of this pamphlet, 'eco-socialism' has come to be seen by large numbers of people as the theoretical and action concept most appropriate for mobilizing against capitalism in the twenty-first century' (p. 5).

One of Albritton's key aims in his book is to promote 'practical utopias' to conceptualize changes that are seen as desirable but may also seem too global or too difficult to achieve without a very distant time frame (i.e. hopefully less than a century for the more difficult changes) (p. 23). Unfortunately, he fails to acknowledge an earlier book that is highly relevant in this regard: *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) by the late sociologist Erik Olin Wright, in which he defines 'real utopias' as visions that are achievable through much theorizing and social experimentation and provides numerous examples of real utopias.

Albritton observes that while capitalism is the source of numerous crises, he asserts that the 'greatest crises that we now face are primarily ecological', and that 'for the most part, capitalism cannot deal with ecological crises in an effective way' (p. 42). He calls for an ethics of caring for both humanity and the eco-system, noting that a good educational system can play a key role in promoting ethical behavior, including in terms of dealing with 'democracy, social justice, equality, climate change, cooperation, generosity, citizenship, openness to diversity, or caring for the earth's inhabitants and bio-systems' (p. 49).

In contrast to communism, socialism as a transitional stage would still entail some differential material reward structure. Albritton suggests that possibly a 'ratio of highest income to lowest of four to one might be justified, but such a ratio would need to be debated' (p. 67). He recommends several gradual approaches for redistributing wealth, including raising taxes for the rich, shortening the work day, lowering the cost of basic necessities (or even making them free), extending education and training, and eliminating tax dodging, tax loopholes, and tax havens. Although Albritton's catalogue of practical utopian reforms seem desirable, they have plainly been thought out with application to developed capitalist countries in mind. In contrast, the book does not spell out how such measures might apply to developing countries or how to resolve the inequalities existing between developed and developing societies.

While Albritton recognizes that the problems that humanity faces must be addressed at many levels, ranging from local to global, he nevertheless acknowledges that overall 'it is easier to start locally and build up' (p. 121). Unfortunately, he does not touch in detail upon the role of anti-systemic movements and radical political parties in contributing to such a process. In my view, coordinating the efforts of a wide array of anti-systemic movements, and in a sense create a global meta-movement that seeks to achieve social justice and parity, democratic processes, environmental sustainability, and a safe climate, is vitally important. This is especially so when we can observe that even when radical political parties come to power, as we have seen in recent times under the guise of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia and Syriza in Greece, they face incredible opposition both internally, from local elites and even middle-class people, and externally from hegemonic powers, ranging from multi-national corporations to the United States to the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Beyond Green Capitalism

As a long-time eco-socialist who has worked on environmental issues for some time, including climate change since 2005, I find both *Facing the Apocalypse* and *Eco-Socialism for Now and the Future* to be engaging and readable books accessible to both academics and social activists. Thornett's book provides us with valuable information on efforts to promote eco-socialism within the British Labour Party, something which has not happened to its rough counterpart in the United States, the Democratic Party, even on the part of Bernie Sanders. Sadly, in Australia the Australian Labor Party, which lost the recent federal election, is completely clueless of an eco-socialist agenda and the leadership of the Greens are resistant to it, even if some of its members are eco-socialists or 'water melons' (green on the outside, red on the inside). Albritton's book makes some valuable suggestions for system-challenging transitional reforms that could pave the way to eco-socialism. I welcome both books to the growing literature on eco-socialism, a space to which both academics and activists continue to add, in a time when it becomes increasingly

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apparent that green capitalist and green social democratic proposals are insufficient to contain the ecological and climatic crises and address social justice issues. Humanity faces two overarching imperatives which are intricately interwoven, how do we live in harmony with each other and how do we live in harmony with our fragile eco-system. The more difficult task is how to go from the existing capitalist world system to an eco-socialist one.

About the author:

Hans A Baer is based at the University of Melbourne. He has published on a diversity of research topics, including Mormonism, African-American religion, socio-political life in East Germany, critical health anthropology, and Australian climate politics. Baer's most recent books include *Global Warming and the Political Ecology of Health* (with Merrill Singer, Left Coast Press, 2009), *Global Capitalism and Climate Change* (AltaMira, 2012), *Climate Politics and the Climate Movement in Australia* (with Verity Burgmann, Melbourne University Press, 2012), *The Anthropology of Climate Change* (with Merrill Singer, Routledge, 2014; 2nd edition, 2018), *Democratic Eco-Socialism as a Real Utopia* (Berghahn Books, 2018).