

Ecology vs. Social Justice: A Contrived Conflict

by Lorna Salzman (March 2014)

Introduction

Though rumblings continue from social justice activists on why social justice should take precedence over ecological concerns, the notion that these are incompatible is quite mistaken, even dangerous. This arises primarily because American liberals and the left generally have emerged from and are motivated by the intense, overriding ideology of equality.

Since the emergence of the human species, the concepts of altruism and loyalty have broadened, starting with the family, moving out to tribes or clans (which consisted of more distant relatives), then to ethnic or religious groups, and eventually to the modern concept of the nation-state. Sometime starting in the late 19th century, this ethical concern was expanded to include nonhuman species and scientists explored the fact that humanity depended upon these very same species and natural systems for their own material sustenance. Today, the left has, after much hesitation, understood this material dependence on Nature but, disturbingly, still does not share the ethical concern for nonhuman Nature; thus liberals and the left define progress as achieving only those things that will provide material and economic improvement of the poor. In the liberal media, one repeatedly reads commentaries on the problems of economic inequality and social welfare, the role of government in addressing these, and on the lack of a social democracy such as those in western European countries where major national sectors such as transportation, health and energy are nationalized within a system of free enterprise and capitalism.

This ideology, though seemingly compassionate, precludes a serious analysis of the root causes of both ecological and

socio-economic problems. That ecological and social injustice share the same roots, or that solutions could be found that address both, is something that has not yet entered into the social justice movement mentality. This is unfortunate, to say the least, not only because it stands in the way of fundamental systemic reforms, but because it precludes the formation of a large movement that could force our government to take strong steps to solve environmental problems such as climate change.

Anyone standing outside the American political scene and looking in would not be optimistic about the future. A quick look would reveal serious and noteworthy efforts to address economic inequality and environmental degradation, as well as the death grip of corporations and Wall St. on government. But there is little of consequence to show for these efforts. One need only look at the legislative and policy paralysis in Washington. Or one could look at the frozen corpse that remains after the fruitless attempts to address climate change. How could this be? Or rather, how did this come to be?

No nation exceeds – much less matches – the accomplishments of the American environmental movement that emerged following Earth Day 1970. The key environmental federal statutes on clean air, clean water, workplace safety and endangered species, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), were enacted almost immediately after this celebration, leading to the creation of state and local agencies which in turn established environmental bureaus and enacted their own laws and policies. The unanimity of the public in demanding these laws was unprecedented and they were signed into law by a Republican president, Richard M. Nixon, replicating the advances of an earlier Republican environmentalist, Theodore Roosevelt.

There is no doubt that the subsequent environmental movement arose from the same ancestry as the anti-war, pro-civil rights and women's movements, both here and in Europe. The questioning of the social and economic order became loud and rude, enhanced by leftist anti-capitalist rhetoric and a fondness for direct action and street theater, which found their place in the anti-nuclear power movement that ultimately stopped nuclear reactor construction in its tracks. With this success under its belt, activists felt emboldened.

But from 1980 onwards, obstacles blocked their way: the election of Ronald Reagan, the

compromises made by national environmental organizations based in Washington in order to curry favor with Congress and wealthy funders, the emergence of identity politics based on race, gender and sexual preference, and the increased resistance by the Democratic Party to anything more than marginal and incremental liberal reforms (mostly on social issues) – all conspiring to create a wall between the public and their government.

As a result, activism was refocused and channeled into single-issue and pressure group politics, mainly dealing with social justice and more or less subdivided. The environmental movement that had recruited tens of millions of supporters was fragmented between fat-cat groups in Washington, D.C., and local grass roots groups that lacked money and media clout. Ecological discourse withdrew into academia and its specialized journals. Subdivisions of the movement appeared: bioregionalism, left greens, animal rights, vegetarianism, New Age and spirituality groups, recycling, renewable energy campaigns, organic agriculture, much of it tarnished by various counterculture groupings whose distrust of the science and technology establishments rubbed off onto the general public and created a backlash against science itself, the very tool that is needed to protect the earth's species and systems.

The absence of a coherently articulated ecological philosophy and ethics in these new groupings was not surprising, because this void reflected the absence of ecological discourse in intellectual and liberal circles and their journals. This is not to mention the hesitancy of the mass media to print the ubiquitous bad news about the earth's condition so as not to alienate advertisers. Despite the success of Earth Day 1970, no mandatory environmental studies at either the high school or college level appeared, and none exist today. What little gets taught about the environment is a result of dedicated individual science teachers, mostly in private schools. On top of this, is the disturbing fact that most people get their news, environmental and otherwise, not from journals or books but from popular blogs on the internet, and almost entirely from sources or writers whose political views they share.

At a time in human history when an understanding of humanity's place in the natural world and recognition of the degraded state of the earth are most needed, the general public is retreating into anti-intellectualism and anti-rationality, finding comfort in invented spiritual belief systems that require no intellectual exertion or political commitment. The rejection of science fills the spectrum from left to right.

The main political divide in the liberal/left community is between those who still believe in working within the system (i.e. lobbying, legislation and policy change) and those, mostly on the left, who see systemic corruption as eternal and believe that social and political change arise only from mass movements outside the halls of power. Reinforcing the former view is the

Democratic Party and its permanent cadres who adhere to their party like lampreys and lambaste anyone who dares to challenge their candidates, as Ralph Nader did in 2004. Of course neither of the two major parties is in good health, as their members retreat into one special interest group or another...from the frying pan into the fire.

Like the fable of the three blind men and the elephant, the social justice groups concerned with racism, poverty and inequality see their individual issue as the key determinant of social justice. What is more disturbing is the ongoing hostility to environmentalism, in the belief that social justice is not only a more pressing issue but that radical social justice reform, such as blanket amnesty for massive illegal immigration, will inevitably lead to environmental protection. Of course they have it backwards; while social justice is necessary, it is not sufficient. It is naive to think that a socially just system will necessarily be an ecological one. One can conceive of a equitable or socialized system with happy workers and clean workplaces that still extracts the earth's resources with no regard to other species or the earth's support systems. Conversely, "A radical, ecologically-inspired politics that aims at ecological sanity and reconstruction necessarily subsumes all the issues of socioeconomic injustice and oppression with which social ecologists are concerned."¹

Most puzzling is the social justice movement's failure to understand that radical environmentalism poses the greatest threat to Business as Usual, to the system that is responsible for both inequality and ecological disaster, and to the corporate/government partnership they deplore. Of course, corporations and government, being more astute, fully understand this threat – hence their attempts to either discredit environmentalists or to buy them off.

At the start of my environmental career in the 1970s, I witnessed many hostile attacks from the left on environmentalists, who were accused of being indifferent to social injustice. One possible reason for these attacks was the urban-rural split. Social justice activists were focused on urban pollution, jobs, transportation, and community issues, which they did not define as environmental but rather as having their roots in racial and economic discrimination. This definition was deliberate since it allowed for more successful community organizing and allowed them to stand apart from and be critical of the more broadly focused environmental groups. For many years, even decades, the inner city activists kept their distance from the white, middle class environmental movement, and later, despite this distancing, accused them of racist hiring practices. People of color rarely joined environmental groups but were ready to attack them for being lily white. After the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, there were complaints about the exclusion of black groups even though

none of these groups had ever concerned itself with globalization. And not all black and minority groups had clean hands: CORE took money from Exxon and the NAACP has supported nuclear power.

More attacks from the left came on those who said that economic growth was at the root of the environmental crisis. Growth, technology and industrialism were regarded as necessary to close the gap between rich and poor. Barry Commoner dismissed environmentalism and said the problem was the wrong choice of technologies. A debate over economic growth took place between me and Carl Boggs in the *Green Letter*, published by the Green Committees of Correspondence, a precursor of the Association of State Green Parties and the U.S. Green Party. Wilderness advocates were marginalized. Efforts to protect habitats, open space, and endangered species were ignored or vilified. As time went on, these attacks eased up, and then the appearance of the U.S. Green Party seemed to suggest a convergence of social and ecological justice.

But this was not to be. The party, in its original form, was an association of state green parties charged with developing a comprehensive platform integrating both environmental and social justice concerns. The doors to the big tent were thrown open, and predictably all the ideological hordes descended, each with its own demands. Vegetarians faced down New England livestock farmers. Dissent and self-criticism were discouraged and unity sought at all costs; a crucial decision was made not to elevate any particular philosophy above any other. A laundry list of "Ten Key Values" filled in for principles and a mission statement. The Ecology Committee changed its name to Life Forms and vowed to persuade Native Americans to abandon hunting and fishing. Ultimately the lack of a coherent intellectual core, especially the resistance to an emphasis on ecology, led to a tower of social justice babble and the party's deserved retreat into oblivion. Its refusal to become the voice of ecological sanity ultimately destroyed it.

There are without question other influences on the social justice movement, in particular the Marxist theory of economic determinism. If one defines social justice as emerging from economic relations, the corollary is that environmental justice also emerges from economic relations. In this regard, Tom Athanasiou's review of *Catastrophism*² in the spring 2013 issue of *Earth Island Journal* is revealing: he states that we must put "global economic justice square at the center of the green political agenda."

Why it should not be the reverse is not explained. The left has not achieved any notable success in promoting economic justice in any case. Why should Athanasiou demand that *his* agenda be adopted by the green movement? Or is he trying to ignore the fact that a green political agenda would necessarily subsume some quite radical socio-economic reforms:

renewable energy, a carbon tax, an end to fossil fuel subsidies (an economic policy the left has never even discussed), shutting nuclear power plants, stopping genetic manipulation? Or is he just subtly attacking the movement that, for forty years, defended at great personal cost and sacrifice, those who have been displaced, fired, sickened or poisoned by the industrial growth system that he calls capitalism? Indeed, why would his suggestion not lead to a "catastrophism" descending on humanity if ecological principles are edged out in favor of economic determinism?

The as yet unmentioned divider, which will eventually emerge, is that of economic growth. Minorities, workers and unions have uncritically supported a resumption and expansion of economic growth. Van Jones, a former Obama adviser, has proposed a Green Growth Alliance, along the lines of the Apollo Alliance that was formed to revive the American auto industry. But any honest analysis of both economic and environmental problems will eventually conclude that economic growth – growth in resource exploitation, production and consumption – will, notwithstanding the economists' fondest wishes, never resume to the extent that is hoped for and most assuredly not at the scale necessary to support the untrammled consumption of the past fifty years. Australian Ted Trainer and others have proven that the consumer society as we know it cannot be supported by renewable energy. And whatever society can be supported by it will bear no resemblance to the one we are living in today. It is this new world that the green agenda hopes to bring into being.

Growth is not only bad; it is over. The energy, social, political and resource constraints are converging in the "perfect storm," presaging the global collapse of industrialism. While corporations and economists will cook the books and whistle in the dark, the downturn has already started, as witness the woes of the EU and the desperation to develop the last global fossil fuel reserves, the most difficult and costly of all (natural gas fracking, tar sands, oil shale, biofuels), that they hope will substitute for oil and lubricate the growth engine indefinitely. They still haven't realized that that the energy inputs needed to develop these sparse remote sources are becoming greater than the energy returned, called EROEI. The EROEI (Energy Return on Energy Invested) will continue to diminish. And as corporations scramble to survive, social justice will be shoved aside in the free-for-all as newly industrialized nations like China and India vie for a bigger piece of the diminishing pie.

These are the social and economic justice implications of a third world war for energy and resources in which everyone loses. And then there is the issue of time. Does anyone seriously suggest that we have time to work for universal social justice in order to correct the ecological imbalance? Long before that, (and it isn't, in any case, guaranteed), climate change, environmental degradation and overpopulation will have trumped their agenda.

(1) Lorna Salzman, "Politics as if Evolution Mattered: Some Thoughts on Deep and Social Ecology," presented at the Ecopolitics IV conference, University of Adelaide, South Australia, Sept. 21-24, 1989.

(2) *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse & Rebirth*, Sasha Lilley et al, foreword by Doug Henwood, PM Press, 2012.

Lorna Salzman's career as an environmental activist and writer began when the late David Brower hired her to be the regional representative of Friends of the Earth in NYC. Later she worked as an editor on *National Audubon's American Birds* magazine and as director of Food & Water, an early opponent of food irradiation, and then spent three years as a natural resource specialist in the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and in 2004 she sought the U.S. Green Party's presidential nomination. She is the author of “