

The importance and neglect of “social ecology”.

23.8.2025

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The term “social ecology” is used to refer to the political philosophy advocated by Murray Bookchin. It will be argued below that this is unfortunate as it gives the term “ecology” a quite different meaning to that applied in the biological realm. The latter sense is extremely important in the social realm, but has not been focal in social theorising. Its significance becomes especially clear in the debate between socialist and anarchist perspectives on the degrowth alternative to capitalism and the strategy to achieve it.

Much thinking about desirable social forms is preoccupied solely with the role of the state, both with respect to the nature of a desirable society and how to get to it. This is the dominant characteristic of socialist thought. This owes much to what it will be argued is a fundamental mistake in Marx’s theory, which is the failure to recognise the significance of social ecology in the sense in which it is being used in the following discussion. This strong tendency to focus on the state is also evident in much degrowth thinking. Often the endorsed goals can only be achieved by state action, and the path to a satisfactory society is often assumed to be via action by the state.

It will be argued that the form that a sustainable and just society must take, given the nature of the global predicament, cannot be state centred but must involve mostly small highly self-sufficient and self-governing communities in control of their local economies. These cannot be run from the centre, and the state cannot establish them. Their viability and adequacy will depend almost entirely on their internal structures and processes, that is on their social ecology.

The following discussion endeavours to show the crucial importance of this realm. When it is clear it is evident that the analysis of a desirable society and of the path to it must be in terms of an Anarchist perspective, not a Socialist perspective.

. The concept “social ecology”.

First it is necessary to distinguish between the meaning of “social ecology” being used in the following discussion and that which Murray Bookchin has given the term and is more or less universally adopted. His reference is to a political ideology and project focused on the need for a more respectful relationship between humans and the environment. Although in his later writings he shifted to the term “Communalism”, “social ecology” is now widely used to refer to this (admirable and highly influential) revolutionary and utopian concern. This meaning is evident in many of his writings and those of his devotees.

For instance, the opening words in his essay “What is Social Ecology?” (Bookchin 2006) are, “Social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all of our present

ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems.” Later in this essay he says, “Social ecology is an appeal not only for moral regeneration but, and above all, for social reconstruction along ecological lines.” (p. 35), and “... social ecology seeks to redress the ecological abuses that the prevailing society has inflicted on the natural world .”... (p.46.) His many writings usually detail the nature of the kind of society he wishes to see.

This use of the term “ecology” is inappropriate and unfortunate since it has nothing to do with its use in the analysis of biological systems, where it has a meaning which is extremely relevant to the analysis of social systems.

Consider the ecological system within a rainforest. It involves an immensely rich and complicated network of structures, process, components, interactions, dependencies and mutual relations. For instance, the soils are often thin, so big trees have large buttresses, enabling them to reach the light to flower, producing fruit that feed bats who distribute the seeds. The form and functioning of the system depend on the interaction of these many kinds of conditions, interactions and forces. Altering one thread in a spider’s web might affect all the others. Eliminating a top predator species could trigger cascading effects on all other component of the ecosystem. Clear a rainforest and its soils might quickly erode away or turn to rock-like laterite, prohibiting the forests regrowth. Rainforest cannot be established quickly; it can only evolve via a long evolutionary history of interactions and relationships.

Now consider the social ecology evident in a typical rich world dormitory neighbourhood. It is typically severely impoverished, involving few structures, interactions or relationships. Dense landscapes to the horizon can be full of isolated households which have nothing to do with each other. The few social connections are mainly with distant formal agencies such as workplaces, schools, the government, and relatives living far away. Such a social ecology resembles a biological desert.

In a thriving village the social relations are more like those in the rainforest, and the nature, robustness and quality of the society depends heavily on its social conditions and processes. If some participants are not keen to attend working bees the fruit trees will be neglected and other members will be discontented.

Within a small community trust, care, responsibility, customs, and reputation form a complex network that can only be built slowly as a history of interactions accumulates. To get to know another person and to bond with him takes time. One’s value in the eyes of others, one’s reputation, cannot be given or bought. Familiarity requires face to face interactions over time, in different contexts. This slowly builds multi-faceted understandings, memories and customs. “Jim is my go to for advice on beekeeping, he plays second row with me in the football team, he came over one stormy night and got our cat down from the roof, his blacksmithing skills fixed our gate, he’s a good committee chairman.” Thus the village’s social ecology has been built slowly out of a history of experiences, embedded in the minds of its members.

But when a society is made up by a state which rules from the centre and citizens who obey its edicts, there is at best an impoverished social ecology that is largely irrelevant to their life experience or the functioning of the society. Socialists in

general and Marx in particular have failed to recognise, and have not needed to recognise, the significance of social ecology. In fact Marx's account of communism could be said to have failed to recognise society at all. It took for granted that the state would run post-revolutionary socialism, then fade away, without any suggestion as to what would then be the nature of the social ecology that the resulting communism would involve. Obviously there would be an elaborate social ecology of some kind. Implicitly or otherwise his vision of communism is an anarchism, whereby citizens somehow participate in determining what happens in a stateless society.

Kopotkin's book Mutual Aid (TSW 2017) provides a remarkable account of the social ecology that existed within the medieval guilds, whereby members regarded each other as brothers bound by powerful obligations and the willingness to look after the welfare of all. He explains how the rise of the state with its determination to establish centralised power destroyed this ecology. The social ecology was very different to that which prevails today where there is little between the individual citizen and the state running things, most obviously no arrangements whereby people interact to take control of their own locality and fate.

Thus in a thriving village members are conscious of their rich, robust, complex, subtle social ecology. They would have a clear awareness of the need to look after the health of both their biological ecology and their social ecology.

Why does this matter?

From the dominant perspectives on the global predicament it doesn't matter much at all. Both pro-capitalist and pro-socialist camps assume that the over-riding determinants of society's fate are located at the top, that is at the state level. But The Simpler Way perspective contradicts this assumption, arguing that a sustainable and just society cannot be achieved without transition to a radically different kind of society, one in which most people live frugally in small, highly self sufficient and self governing, cooperative communities. The following discussion will outline the case for this view, and make clear why the concept of social ecology is crucial within it.

The global predicament.

The basic cause of the many alarming global problems we face is the pursuit of affluent "living standards" and economic growth, the determination to produce and consume more and more, without limit, even in the richest countries. We have far exceeded the limits to growth and seven of the nine most important "Planetary Boundaries" (Rockstrom et al., 2009.). There is no possibility that the per capita levels of resource consumption in rich countries can be kept up for long or spread to all people. Only a few of the world's people have these "living standards" and the rest can never rise to anything like them. These standards could not be possible without an annual net flow of wealth in the form of resources from poor to rich countries greater than \$2 trillion every year. (Hickel. 2022.)

This over consumption and exceeding of the limits to growth is the basic cause of the most serious global problems, including resource depletion, environmental damage, the deprivation of billions in the poor countries, resource struggles and wars, and declining cohesion and quality of life in the richest countries.

Most people do not seem to realise how far rich world lifestyles and economies have gone beyond sustainable levels of production and consumption. There is a strong case that if we are to live in sustainable ways then rich world per capita rates of consumption must be reduced by at least 80%. (See Trainer, 2021.)

The common response to this case is the “the-fix” claim that technical advance will enable GDP growth to be “decoupled” from resource and environmental impact. There is now overwhelming evidence that this is not happening and is not going to happen. Haberle et al.’s review examined over 800 studies. (2020) In some limited areas output can be increased while effects are reduced but in general if GDP is increased impacts increase.

A major cause of the problem is the fact that the present economic system must constantly grow and allows the market to determine what happens. As a result what is produced, who gets it and what is developed are what is most profitable to the few who own most of the capital, and not what is most needed. That is why the rich few have come to own about half the world’s wealth, and the Third World has been developed into a form which exports their resources to enrich the corporations and rich world shoppers while most of their people lead impoverished lives.

The crucial point is that we cannot achieve a sustainable way of life which all could share unless there is an enormous degrowth transition to far simpler lifestyles and systems. Since the 1980s The Simpler Way project has been putting forward such a vision, (Trainer 1985, TSW 20).

The simpler way solution.

The Simpler Way argument is that the basic social form for a sustainable and just society must be mostly small scale, highly self-sufficient, self-governing, and collectivist communities in control of their local economies, and willingly accepting far simpler systems and lifestyles. Resource and ecological impacts can be dramatically reduced only in these kinds of communities. This is illustrated by a study of egg supply which found that the industrial-agribusiness-supermarket path involves resource and dollar costs around fifty times those of backyard and community cooperative production. (Trainer, Malik and Lenzen, 2019.) Such localised supply systems can eliminate most of the the need for transport, marketing, commuting, packaging, waste removal and insurance while enabling the recycling of all food nutrients to local methane digesters and soils, and the elimination of the need for poultry feed factories, fertilizer imports and sewer systems.

These principles, savings and benefits enabled by localisation are evident in many other sectors including manufacturing, house building (from earth), clothing, leisure, education and health. In addition there are the psychological savings and benefits associated with a higher quality of life, more community solidarity, freedom from stress, (e.g., no threat of unemployment), more time for arts and crafts, and for personal development, etc. Resource and dollar expenditures on “welfare”, prisons, psychological illness etc. are likely to be greatly reduced.

These kinds of arrangements are evident in many ecovillages. The Dancing Rabbit ecovillage in Missouri has per capita resource consumption rates around 5 - 10% of US averages, while enjoying above average quality of life indices. (Lockyer 2017.)

Trainer (2019) shows how a Sydney outer suburb could be restructured to enable almost all food to be produced from within its boundaries. A study of resource use and costs on an Australian homestead finds similar very large reductions. (Trainer 2024, Pigface Point video 2023.)

These communities are run via thoroughly participatory arrangements among equal citizens, involving town assemblies, committees and working bees, which make and implement the decisions to maximise the welfare of the town. There can still be a (minor) role for market forces, and most productive property might be privately owned in the form of small firms and farms, operating within strict guidelines which ensure that development is socially beneficial. There would still be a (much reduced) role for “state” bureaucracies, and a national economy geared to provide towns with small quantities of light machinery and materials etc. which they cannot produce for themselves. There could be more resources than there are at present for universities, the training of professionals, high-tech medicine and R and D on socially important issues. However most technologies would be simple and not dependent on heavy industry, complex and energy dependent machinery, IT, international trade, highly trained personnel or significant non-renewable resource inputs.

None of this is possible unless there is profound cultural change, away from competitive individualist obsession with acquisitiveness, and to prioritising cooperative community welfare and non-material sources of life satisfaction. There would be much time to pursue these, given that only two days a week might need to be spent working for money.

Easily overlooked are the “spiritual” rewards of The Simper Way. (TSW, 2018) and the way the situation would involve conditions, incentives and rewards encouraging conscientious and enjoyable citizenship.

Given the nature of the global predicament outlined above, the argument is that this general vision is non-negotiable; there is no alternative capable of solving the problems being generated by growth and affluence society while ensuring a high quality of life for all. It need not be said that the probability that such a vast transition will be achieved is currently very low, but that is not central here; the issue is, is there any other way out of the present descent to a probably terminal time of troubles. If not, then the task is to work for eventual transition regardless of its prospects.

Hence the relevance of social ecology.

Economis ignores

Marx

Ecofeminism sig

It needs to be said again that much thinking about desirable social forms is preoccupied solely with the role of the state, both with respect to the nature of a desirable society and how to get to it. This is especially evident in the degrowth literature and it is the dominant element in socialist thought.

However if The Simpler Way vision outlined above is the solution to the global predicament then the village not the state is the focal institution and it cannot be established or run from the centre; it must be established by ordinary citizens at the grassroots level and run via anarchist principles. The crucial point is that its functioning, effectiveness, sustainability and indeed survival will depend predominantly on its social ecology. Whether or not good decisions are made, conflicts are avoided, problems are identified and attended to, everyone is provided for, arrangements will last over time, and the quality of life of all is maximised etc., will depend entirely on the complex pattern of procedures, relationships, customs, obligations and debts, reputations, attitudes and ideals that have been established throughout its history.

For hundreds of years in traditional Ladakh society no one had to suffer loneliness, or homelessness or to fear ending up in an old persons home. In many societies village elders are able to quietly and invisibly defuse conflicts. Among the Rojavan Kurds it is taken for granted that women will share the sharing of committees. These are elements within those social ecologies which determine desirable social outcomes. Ecofeminists stress the crucial role women play in the maintenance and reproduction of social ecologies. Conventional economic theory totally ignores this realm and proceeds as if satisfactory “development” can be analysed solely in terms of monetary exchanges

According to the standard socialist vision the form, functioning and fate of society will depend predominantly if not entirely on the state, and it is not very important what happens at lower levels so long as there is compliance with state rule. Avineri (1968) points out that in the standard Marxist view the immediately post-revolutionary “socialist” mentality of the worker will not have changed with respect to acquisitiveness, competition, acceptance of alienated work conditions, and acceptance of rule from the top. All that has been required of the worker’s mentality is that it supports revolution, that is, that it has shifted from a “class in itself” to “a class for itself.” These dispositions are supposed to be altered in the slow subsequent transition from socialism to communism.

However if the village is the necessary post-revolutionary social form it is evident that Marx and current socialists have the order of events around the wrong way. The transition must be led by a cultural revolution involving the development of a new and elaborate social ecology and only if this is successful can it lead to revolutionary change in economic, political and power systems.

This has profound implications for thinking about degrowth strategy. It means that here and now effort must go primarily into the changing of consciousness, firstly regarding the need for transition out of capitalist society, and secondly towards the ideas values and dispositions without which The Simpler Way cannot exist, and third towards the development of robust local social ecologies. Progress is being made on these tasks, but there is a very long way to go. This means that at this point of time it is a serious mistake to plead for or to demand policy change at the state level, or attempt to take state power. (For more detailed discussion of degrowth strategy see Trainer 2024.)

The socialist is likely to protest that being in control of the state would enable the new consciousness and ways to be introduced and facilitated. But the logic here is faulty. There are only two ways that the control of the state for Simpler Way purposes could come about. The first is via some kind of coup whereby power is seized by a vanguard party which has the intention of implementing The Simpler Way, and then converting uncomprehending masses to it. That is not plausible. The second path would be via the election to government of a party with a Simpler Way platform. But that could not happen unless the (cultural or ideological) revolution for a Simpler Way had previously been won. A Simpler Way party could not be elected to control of the state until after it had persuaded the majority of people to its ideas and proposals. That revolution would be essentially constituted by the development of widespread acceptance of the Simpler Way vision. Taking state power would then become conceivable, as a consequence of the revolution.

What is to be done?

The practical strategic implication from this discussion not that we should set up lots of new ecovillages on greenfield sites. The more new ecovillages the better but they difficult and to establish and that is not necessary. The task is to transform existing towns and neighbourhoods towards implementation of the main ways that ecovillages function, especially in developing highly self sufficient local economies, cooperative systems, and participatory self government. The Rojavan Kurds provide inspiring examples of this, devolving many functions such as education, problem solving, justice, planning, etc to the neighbourhood committee level.

But above all revolutionary energy should not go primarily into trying to get the state to implement degrowth policies. The state will not and cannot do that, beyond token steps. It must deliver growth or the system will implode. The supremely important strategic task is to alter the mentality driving this system, that is to increase the recognition that the pursuit of growth and affluence is now suicidal, that the alternative must be some kind of simpler way, and that we must build where we live the social ecologies that it requires.

Implications for research.

Unfortunately there is little clear understanding of this complex realm. Despite the existence of much relevant literature few well establish general conclusions can be stated regarding the nature and functioning of social ecologies, let alone enabling the design of thriving villages.

Following is an indication of the kinds of questions which need to be explored. It is not being assumed that precise blueprints can eventually be drawn up, but studies along these lines are likely to yield valuable guidance for the transition.

- Mapping of social ecological patterns and their components and relationships, within different kinds of social forms.
- Analysis of the social ecologies observable in thriving communities.

- What constitutes “thriving”? Thus the need to develop measures of welfare, cohesion, solidarity, social bonding, morale and quality of life.”
- How do biological ecologies affect social ecologies? For instance how do different soil types, climates, landscapes etc. influence particular social ecologies?
- Development of effective systems for monitoring. Is it desirable for a village to have a committee watching over cohesion and quality of life factors?
- What institutions and arrangements contribute to cohesion? For instance is it necessary to have formal conflict resolution procedures, monitoring arrangements, informal village elders.
- What are the best ways to handle conflicts of different kinds?
- What is the significance of diversity? Does cohesion require limits to differences?
- What governing procedures seem to work best? Is consensus seeking crucial?
- Is there an ideal village size/range? (Dunbar’s number?)
- How best to structure a town? Should neighbourhoods be the village units, as in Rojava?
- What is the relationship between the villages and large scale and regional cooperatives such as the Catalan Integral Cooperative?
- What skills and procedures are desirable for enabling feedback and criticism without offending.
- What forms does “leadership take”, and what might be limits and dangers, for instance emergence of dominating elites or the village “big man”.
- Above all, how best to maintain village cohesion overtime? Is it desirable to have a village history committee? What is the role for periodic celebrations and festivals? What are the implications for the education of youngsters. To what extent will conscientious and responsible citizenship develop automatically as a result of living in a successful village? To what extent should formal strategies be implemented, such as the study of relevant aspects of sociology and political theory etc?

Conclusion.

The simpler way is a basically anarchist vision. Its merits are not confined to its capacity to defuse the multi-factorial global sustainability problem. The foregoing discussion supports the claim that it also illustrates the correct form of government

for humans. For at least 10,000 years western society has been dominated by hierarchical, authoritarian and tyrannical forms of government. But in their book The Dawn of Everything Graeber and Wengrow (2021) point out that there have been non-western civilizations which have not taken this path but have practised forms of stateless, egalitarian, participatory democracy. They puzzle over how the West got stuck on the wrong path, in how we might get off it.

It would seem that we will be obliged to abandon this sorry path by the advent of the limits to growth. It is likely that we are entering a time of great and possibly terminal troubles, which will force upon us a “great simplification” in which there will be no choice but to strive to build local cooperative participatory arrangements. Many movements are working in this direction. Their chances of success will depend greatly on the effectiveness of the social ecologies they enable. Hence the importance of giving greater attention to the concept.

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