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Left ecology, deep ecology and shallow environmentalism.


reviewed by Don Alexander

This is a difficult book to review. One can only give a summary of the risk of doing violence to Paehlke's arguments, which are complex and detailed. Deliberates offers three main theses: that environmentalism is neither left nor right, and yet has the potential to become the first significant new ideology in over a century; that the traditional doctrines of liberalism and socialism are no longer adequate to the task of dealing with our global situation — the conditions in which they emerged have been superseded, and environmental concerns are not an integral part of their praxis; and that an environmentalist progressivism has the potential to supplant neo-conservatism as the dominant politics of our time.

Paehlke makes a good case for his first point. The major environmental thinkers of the last 180 years have had a variety of geopolitical viewpoints, no ideology can claim credit for their insights (or errors, as with Malthus). Moreover, in questioning growth, progress and centralism, environmentalism has achieved much of the closely held assumptions of liberalism and socialism.

Having said this (and Paehlke's book gives a good overview of environmental thought), his account is deficient inasmuch as he has not adequately distinguished the three main currents in contemporary environmentalism. These are: left ecology, deep ecology, and what the deep ecologists call "shallow environmentalism". The shallow environmentalists are characterized by the belief that environmental problems can be solved without a radical change in existing political or economic structures. Prime Minister Gino Brandtland and Canada's Maurice Strong would fit into this category. This group also tends to be anthropocentric — believing that people exist for the benefit of human beings. Deep ecologists, on the other hand, believe in a "biocentric" perspective — that human needs are no more important than those of any other species. Deep ecologists tend to blame human beings indistinguishably for the destruction of nature, rather than blaming the underlying social structures and, while not unsympathetic to institutional change, are occasionally prone to misanthropic "solutions". The left ecologists (social ecologists, socialist environmentalists, and many eco-feminists) believe that the domination of humans by humans must be addressed in order to remedy humanity's domination of nature. This is a disparate set of differences, and would include figures like Frances Moore Lappé, Barry Commoner (both discussed at length by Paehlke) and Murray Bookchin. All agree that ecological change is necessary, that there are many causes contributing to the environmental crisis, and that there are a number of possible solutions. The strength of Paehlke's review is that he treats environmentalism, with all its inconsistencies, as a fundamentally "new and important" category, with a common body of concerns that evolved over a number of years, rather than as a subset of some existing ideology. Accepting the "anonymity" of political ecology and its subject matter, one can also argue that, to be consistent, this truly ecological (as opposed to "shallow environmentalist") perspective must stress the relationship between the social crisis and the ecological crisis.

Traditionally, the socialist movement has been concerned with "distributive" issues. A distributive approach does not necessarily make one sensitive to ecological cues, nor does an environmentalist perspective necessarily make one sensitive to demands for social justice. But distributive issues interpenetrate with environmental issues, as is clearly demonstrated by the crisis in the Amazon, where landless peasants are diverted to the jungle as a safety valve to protect landless in other parts of Brazil, or in the case of the herdsmen and farmers who are aggravating desertification in the Sahel — after being pushed off their traditional lands by agribusiness. Even so-called "overpopulation" in Third World countries can be attributed in part to the economic and cultural instabilities created by European colonialism.

If anything, Paehlke oversimplifies the "left" dimension by restricting it to a so-called "distributive" issues. It should not be forgotten that feminists have raised the issue of patriarchal social relations, anarchists have discussed the increased statistical number of society, and anti-racists like Ivan Illich have focussed on the growing "expertization" of modern culture. All of these analyses are directly relevant to an understanding of ecological possibilities.

Paehlke is right to focus on the contradiction between humanity and nature as an aspect of reality requiring its own analysis, so long as the links are made with these other bodies of thought. The Marxist analysis of alienation is certainly necessary, but could only be effective if combined with a deep ecology perspective (since replicated by anarchists and radical feminists) to treat their contradiction (be it class, sex, or governing vs. governed) as subsumed within the larger context of the dominant ecological contradiction. This reductionism is being impeded by the deep ecologists who want to make deep ecology a political entity. No one wants to see the shallow ecological perspective as the dominant perspective and the left. One tries to avoid perceiving "practical" purity", but this is one of those situations where it might be appropriate to be purists. Second, capitalism and its inherent "grow or die" system; it is not clear how the emerging levels of economic growth can grow without at least some increase in levels of non-renewable energy and resource consumption. Increased reliance on renewables would help, but a relationship between "growth" and "throughput" would nonetheless remain.

As for asceticism, I would be the first to admit that environmentalists (myself included) sometimes have a moralistic attitude — that change must involve sacrifice, almost as a form of penance. But I am suspicious of those who would tell people that we can "have our cake and eat it too", that we can have the growth, security and amenity that come from a healthy biosphere. I too believe that a life of relative comfort and security can be had for all, but the "environmental protection with growth" argument is still a different from the natural establishment's line that we can postpone the day of reckoning through the cleverness of technology, we can never avoid the problem. I side with Canadian authors, John Walland and Wayland Drew, in their belief that an ecological sound world can only be had through "limitation", through people in the world recognizing that, in the spirit of reciprocity (recognizing the interconnectedness of all things), we must place limits on our consumption and take into account the needs of the "Other" species, ecosystems, and the biosphere as a whole.

Maybe, in our pampas "system of response" we won't play well in Poria. But if ecological ethics do not become a conscious part of human conduct, we are doomed. Balance is not a false goal, but a survival imperative; it is to be practiced consciously.

The last thesis pertains to rural and...
decentralization. There are three arguments that can be made against ruralism, and Paehlke makes all three. The first is that, in an overwhelmingly urban society, environmentalists have to make themselves relevant to urban people. I wholeheartedly agree. He also argues that more intelligent urban settlement patterns may ultimately protect the biosphere and rural ecosystems better than dispersing people throughout the countryside. Again, I think this argument has a lot of merit.

A third argument says that urban culture is intrinsically superior (involves an improved status for women, a lower birth rate, etc.). What I think Paehlke is missing here is that rural settings have long nurtured attributes essential to an ecological society: community, self-reliance, civic responsibility, and appreciation of natural cycles. Modernization (and concomitant urbanization) have largely eroded the subjective conditions for the reconstruction of society along ecological lines. Political mobilization based on self-interest politics will ultimately fail because ecological solutions will always remain “theoretical” and untested as long as existing elites, committed to short-term economic and political gain, remain in power.

Also, if Murray Bookchin and the ecofeminists’ hypothesis is correct that the domination of nature is closely related to forms of hierarchy and domination internal to human society, then the incremental changes advocated by Paehlke will not touch the underlying disease which is bound to reassert itself with greater vigour. A radical decentralization of power is necessary, not only to disarm the multinationals and their political and military patrons, but to instill in each citizen the sense of social and ecological responsibility that must go with a holistic approach to decision-making.

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