

The Left and the Environment

February 2, 2014

I am especially excited about the theme of this year's conference because it represents what I think is a historic advance in left thinking. In all the years of the Left Forum, not to mention the Socialist Scholars Conference before it, plenary speakers have addressed a huge range of left topics from a variety of perspectives. Certainly the ongoing economic crisis has received a great deal of our attention and must continue to. But there have been only two, yes exactly two, plenary speakers who focused on environmental issues: Maude Barlow of Water Watch from Canada and Nnimmo Bassey of Nigeria. Why has it taken us so long?



Partly the reasons are psychological I think—it is so deeply disturbing, sad, and indeed terrifying to think that “almost 2/3 of the natural resources necessary to sustain life on this planet are being degraded or destroyed by human action”—that we have been in denial. But those are the actual words of the UN Ecosystem Millennium Assessment in 2005. Since then the Earth's atmosphere has reached a concentration of 400 parts of CO₂, the highest since the Pliocene Era millions of years ago. Today, when droughts occur in the Midwest, not just North Africa, when sea level rise threatens not only tiny islands in the South Pacific but this very island we are on, it gets harder to deny.

But there are also political reasons for the Left's resistance. The environmental crisis requires a shift from the issues which we have studied and organized around (in which you might say we have sunk intellectual and political capital)—whether they are labor, the economy, anti-war work, feminism or anti-racism, and so on. New issues, new skills, new challenges face us. And the environmental crisis seems particularly difficult to get a handle on just because it's SO big, it can seem overwhelming.

And unlike most left issues, the environmental crisis ultimately affects everyone. Rich as well as poor need clean air and water.... As a speaker at the Washington DC demo against the Keystone pipeline put it—and he was a veteran of the civil rights movement—“that movement was about equality, this one's about existence.” But this very universality seems politically problematic to some on the Left. They worry that all the injustices and miseries against which we have struggled so long will get lost in this one huge humanistic, cross-class issue.

But I want to reassure them that this does not have to happen—it all depends on the politics we bring to it. Because in fact the issues are all causally connected. All the injustices, inequalities and horrors we struggle against are exacerbated by the environmental crisis. Though the rich as well as the poor need our planet's resources, they have conflicting interests as they also profit from its depredations—and meanwhile they can insulate themselves: buying water to drink and biofuels for their SUVs while others starve.... So it is particularly the poor and working class around the world, people in the least developed countries, people of color, and women who suffer the most—and who have organized, globally and in our domestic environmental justice movement.

Or consider wars and imperialism: They have always largely been about resources—but now resources are more scarce, there are more people, and more countries are developing—which they should be—but not in an unsustainable capitalist way. The titles of two important new books sum it up: *The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources*, and *Devouring Dragon*, about the implications for the planet of China's turn to capitalism.

The environmental and economic crises also exacerbate problems of ill-health, of unemployment, and of homelessness, as rural people lose land and water and are forced into cities.

So what is to be done? Can we stop the relentless drive to grow, and consume ever more, and opt for a simpler life? This would certainly be desirable (assuming it were equitable). But what would this do to our economy? What about the all-important issue of jobs...? Of course, there are no jobs on a dead planet.... But can we stop growth and still satisfy people's needs—within a capitalist framework? Some influential people in the environmental movement seem to think so.

Others think that we don't have to limit growth, but that we can transform our economy to a greener form of capitalism, with green jobs, by instituting taxes on pollutants, promoting green technology and businesses, by "de-materializing production" as some have called it... and so on. This too would certainly be preferable, but can we do it, and how? And would it be sufficient if growth continued unchecked?

Or does the environmental crisis show that we need to move to a radically different mode of production oriented to the satisfaction of human needs rather than maximization of profit, in other words, socialism. Only such a system would be ecologically sustainable. But if so, how do we get there?

How do we build the unified movement we need of all who suffer under our present system? What is the role of labor (some of which is on board, others not), of co-ops, of local sustainable economies, in the transition to a sustainable economy? And how do we unify all the many environmental struggles...?

For the good news in all of this is that for every aspect of the environmental crisis there is a movement in opposition: global warming/the climate justice movement; food insecurity/the food sovereignty movement; there are struggles worldwide (both urban and rural) against development and dispossession; around the globe there are struggles against dams, against the privatization of water; against the endless energy demands of our system. There are movements to reduce our dependence on oil, against hydro-fracking, tar sands, coal and mountain top removal, nuclear energy, the Keystone pipeline—and so on....

So there is no need to worry that really facing up to the catastrophic consequences of our current mode of life will so depress people that it will demobilize them. This concern has been expressed in critiques of what some on the Left have called "catastrophism." (Of course, there is no guarantee that the new movements will be successful—they need all the smart political help the Left can bring—but they are our best, and indeed, our only, hope).

Far from being demobilized, these environmental movements exist all over the world, and they include an exciting renewal of indigenous movements like Idle No More in Canada.... Moreover, there is a distinct eco-socialist pole emerging, which certainly understands the connection between the ecological and economic crises. They call themselves System Change, Not Climate Change: check out their table in the book room—as well as all the books....

So there are exciting opportunities opening up for the Left today; some have rightly called this the best argument ever against capitalism, as implicit in all environmental struggles is the fundamental question of who should own the Earth? Should individuals own the Earth? Should corporations? Or perhaps only all of us? Or rather, as Marx wrote, "From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation [i.e. socialism or communism], the private property of individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even...all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth, they are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations...."

Footnotes