

## **Review of *Eco-Socialism or Eco-Capitalism* by Saral Sarkar**

**(Zed Books/ St. Martin's Press, 1999)**

For a number of years, Socialism, both as an ideology and as a political force, has been in decline, eclipsed by liberal 'democracy' and market economics. The rise of radical Conservative politicians like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s seemingly proved irresistible. Further East, the Communist system fell to pieces, with, in some areas, virulent and dangerous forms of Nationalism emerging from the ruins. In the USA, Socialism has been moribund even longer, at least since the days of Eugene Debs and the Socialist Party in the first decades of this century.

Today, it is the market 'liberalisers' and advocates of a grab-what-you-can individualism who are still setting the political agenda. The advent of politicians like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair made little difference. Administrations in Washington, London, Berlin, and other leading countries are dominated by an amorphous politics of 'modernisation'. Generally, they have abandoned all notion of radical reform. At best, they claim to be better 'managers' than rival politicians.

Saral Sarkar's new book argues that the Socialist project is not dead but, to flourish, it must take on board the lessons of ecology. Together, he claims, they can offer a fresh, exciting and relevant vision of an ecologically sustainable and socially just way of living. Certainly the 'invisible hand' of the market, especially under the umbrella of GATT and the World Trading Organisation, has proved to be a highly visible boot, trampling over local communities and environments alike. Sarkar's study is, then, highly apposite.

Those expecting a recipe for tactical success in the here and now will be disappointed. The book goes back to basics, exploring core principles and analytical perspectives. Sarkar recognises that, only when those fundamental elements of a political programme are soundly based, can meaningful strategies be developed. At present, both red and green movements, parliamentary or extra-parliamentary, are making little headway, especially when their rate of progress is set against the speed of global deterioration. For example, Die Grünen, arguably still the strongest green party in the world, seems to suffer routine crises. The parliamentary 'realists' have little to show for their compromises while their critics are just as impotent. There is, then, an urgent need to go back to the drawing board. This makes Sarkar's study even more timely.

A substantial part of the book is a critique of capitalism and its capacity to 'go green'. This is most useful at a time when some of the more shallow environmentalists have adopted the argument that market mechanisms are the best means to achieve sustainability. Even bodies like the Worldwatch Institute and Friends of the Earth seem to accept that tax incentives and the like provide inherently superior tools to the alleged 'dead hand' of regulation and 'bureaucratic red tape'.

### **Left, Right or Wrong**

Sarkar is an unusually well qualified commentator. Originally hailing from West Bengal but, since 1982, resident in Germany, he is well positioned to take a more global overview, drawing upon experience of both industrialised and industrialising parts of the world. He possesses a strong knowledge of the German green movement but also seems quite conversant with the North American literature.

His book is wide-ranging, covering a rich variety of issues. Many 'green' books today, especially those aimed at the academic market, are deadly dull, seldom straying beyond vague generalities. It is all the more welcome, then, to come across a critic who engages directly with actual writers and their ideas. As someone whose writings are criticised by Sarkar, I can report that he writes forcefully but fairly. His style is sometimes a bit awkward but he nonetheless develops his argument with admirable clarity. At a time when the end of history and the death of ideology have been pronounced, with politics reduced to a battle of soundbites about minor policy differences, it is refreshing to find someone who makes no bones about the need for 'an overall theory', 'synthesis' and a 'comprehensive movement'.

His discussion draws heavily on evidence from books. To that extent, he does not quite capture the full character of the Socialist movement, whose essence is, perhaps, to be found elsewhere, in leaflets, weekly newspapers and little pamphlets as well as in meetings in pub backrooms and in conversations. Having worked for a period as a full-time organiser for one

Socialist groupuscule (the International Socialists, now Socialist Worker Party), my image of what makes socialists tick draws on the people I met through such channels rather than the pens of a somewhat narrow range of intellectuals. Such experience tells me that the task of 'greening' socialists might be harder than Sarkar recognises.

## **The limits of capital**

Sarkar's essential argument is that capitalism's very nature makes it inherently unsustainable. Having outlined various limits to physical growth in chapter 4, in the following chapter he demonstrates that the very growth dynamic of the capitalist system makes it ecologically insupportable. Furthermore, socially unsustainable levels of human oppression and exploitation are inherent in the profit motive. For this reason, various market reforms touted by writers such as Amory Lovins and Ulrich von Weizsäcker are, he argues, doomed to failure. In Britain their arguments have been echoed by a former leading Green thinker and activist, Jonathon Porritt who argues that capitalism is the "only game in town" and that there is no alternative but to make it work better. Pigs are more likely to fly, according to Sarkar.

His critique of capitalism is well founded. Monsanto forcibly springs to mind as but one of many examples of the greed and ruthlessness of private corporations. Even those businesses such as 3M, which reasonably might claim to have greened some of their activities, still will cause rising levels of resource depletion and environmental degradation due to their commitment to on-going growth.

Perhaps Sarkar could have developed the argument even more strongly. He might have looked more closely, for example, at how banks and finance houses spin the treadmill of growth even faster as borrowers seek to cover their debts by liquidating yet more ecological 'capital'. Overall, he presents a compelling case that capitalism's very dynamic creates a compulsive search for on-going growth, which, on a finite planet, can only lead to long-term ruin. In other words, its suicidal tendency is not simply the product of a few pathologically greedy bosses in the boardroom or the odd market 'imperfection' (though both add their own malign pressures)

Sarkar displays a commendable grasp of the breadth and depth of the ecological crisis. Unlike so many commentators, he recognises that it is not just a matter of a few rogue pollutants. His argument is all the more relevant given the number of people who see environmental protection as, essentially, a matter of shutting nuclear power stations or removing a few other rotten apples in an otherwise healthy barrel. Sarkar's book systematically punctures such illusions.

Throughout the book Sarkar is refreshingly sanguine about a host of fixes touted by not just enlightened capitalists but also many greens. His discussion of solar electricity and biomass energy should be compulsory reading for those who think that we can switch to alternative modes of production without radical changes in lifestyles and values. He also has many sensible things to say about computerisation, though he pays less attention to its more dangerous cousin, genetic engineering.

## **Looking East**

At the same time, Sarkar conclusively shows that the Soviet model provides no alternative. Stalinist style industrialisation, for example, fuelled the fires of ecological meltdown with an energy matched by few capitalists, as the devastation around the Aral Sea attests. Sarkar equally entertains no illusions about the inequality and brutal repression that have characterised 'command economies'. Indeed in their own warped way, such systems have been as chaotic as market-driven economies, rationally planned in name only.

Communism in power did not give birth to a new society. Sarkar rightly links the Soviet miscarriage to its failure to pay attention to ecological constraints. He also notes the way the poison of bureaucratic privilege corroded the body politic. I wonder whether he could have devoted more space to the malign role of 'vanguardist' theories of politics. According to these and especially Leninist variants, a self-selected élite is deemed — indeed deems itself — to be the carrier of 'true consciousness'. Trotsky's early critiques of Lenin, for example, anticipated the dangerous germ such thinking carried. (To be historically fair, recognition must be given of the material circumstances of post-1917 that gave the virus of bureaucratic degeneration the perfect habitat in which to flourish)

There were other factors at work too to which Sarkar does not do full justice. The cult of machine was a far-reaching tendency in communist circles and amongst cultural fellow travellers. One only has to look at, say, Eisenstein's films, to see visual eulogies to technology and machinery. Readers also may recollect Lenin's dictum that Socialism was soviet plus

electrification. In Trotsky's case, this infatuation with the 'forces of production' led him to extol the potential of nuclear energy and genetic engineering.

At times, the discussion gets a trifle bogged down, especially in his discussion of class and caste in USSR. More seriously, his dissection of Soviet economic failure, while generally full of insight, is surely mistaken in its reference to an 'absence of colonies'. After World War 11, the USSR behaved like a classical imperialist power in its treatment of Eastern Europe. This robbery partly set the scene for the Sino-Soviet split later.

By devoting two chapters to the Soviet model, Sarkar is unable to give sufficient space to other standpoints and experiences in the broader 'labour movement'. Yet it would have been very useful (though it might have required two volumes, not one) to have looked at the non-Communist Left. As Sarkar does note in relation to trade unions and the employment issue, left-wing groups sometimes constitute the most inflexible, last ditch defenders of a destructive industrial order.

Naturally enough, Sarkar concludes that we desperately need a third way and finds it in what he calls 'EcoSocialism'. The final chapters tease out some aspects of this alternative path. Surprisingly he omits some important work on what a 'conservator society' might look like, not least the work of the Australian Ted Trainer (whose writings on limits to growth and particularly fossil fuel reserves he usefully does tap). However, this final section raises a whole raft of issues. Anyone remotely interested in sustainability will find rewarding food for thought.

## Greening Socialism?

Sarkar recognises that there are many aspects of socialist theory and practice that contradict an ecologically informed worldview, 'EcoCentrism'. The more intelligent sections of the Left have recognised the novelty and seriousness of the ecocrisis. Yet they tend to assume that it is possible to bolt on a somewhat limited selection of environmentalist demands to an otherwise unreconstituted political programme.

However, there is also a strong section of the Left that has been - and still is - violently hostile to any ecological message. An particular virulent example in Britain was the magazine *Living Marxism* (subsequently reborn as the even worse "Spiked Online"). There a very bullish view of technology, economic expansion and unrestricted human potential reigned supreme. Even less arrogant socialists patronisingly sneer at what they stereotype as 'single issue politics'. They also mock alleged green naiveté about 'the system'. Many cannot resist *ad hominem* arguments about the middle class background of environmentalists (usually made by people of identical social circumstances). Furthermore, environmentalists are routinely charged with élitism. Unfairly, they have been routinely denounced by the Left as well-heeled people who selfishly wish to pull up the ladder, leaving the poverty-stricken masses to their fate down below.

There is one anti-ecological argument used by socialists which demands more discussion. It is the one which alleges that, although many environmentalists are doubtless nice, well-meaning individuals, there is a darker totalitarian side. The spectre of an 'ecodictatorship' is brandished. The usual suspects, Garrett Hardin to the fore, are rounded up to act as fall-guys that demonstrate these alleged fascistic tendencies. Some point to the Club of Rome, portraying it as a sinister business élite. Yet even superficial acquaintance with the writings of its leading figures such as Aurelio Peccei will reveal a deep commitment to general well-being.

Leftist critics also point to instances where, say, the Nazis encouraged tree planting or experimented with organic farming. Yet it is the overall ideology and policy of a political movement that count. It is difficult to see the connection between any kind of ecological thinking with the expansionist, centralised, militaristic, exterminationist realities of Hitler's régime. It might be noted, in passing, that many socialists for decades denied or acted as apologists for the monstrosities committed in countries such as Stalinist Russia or Maoist China (some readers may remember socialist descriptions of Soviet nuclear weaponry as the "workers' bomb").

In fact, totalitarian solutions are non-solutions since they are deeply unstable and prevent the feedback necessary for any system to be sustainable. There are few, if indeed any, examples of 'environmentally friendly' authoritarian régimes. It is a pity that Sarkar does not devote more space than the short section on p224 to refuting such fishy red herrings.

## **Socialism, Capitalism & Industrialisation.**

There are many other problems with the socialist theory but discussion of them is fraught with difficulties. As Sarkar quickly notes, part of the problem with the whole 'red-green' debate is, of course, terminology. It is far from easy to pin down what is meant by 'Socialism', such is the diversity of its advocates. Serious debate is easily closed off by the rather disingenuous rejoinder that such-and-such a policy or deed was not 'true Socialism'.

Sarkar's critique of Socialism is at its strongest when discussing its general failure to face the various biophysical and social 'limits-to-growth'. Socialist theory has been deeply embedded in a thoroughly cornucopian view of life. Indeed, in some classic socialist texts, notably Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (a classic from Edwardian England), it is suggested that, under Socialism, people would simply take whatever they wanted from gigantic warehouses.

The Marxist tradition has been little different, promising an open cheque marked 'to each according to his needs'. Absent was any idea that there might be limits to those needs or to the number of individuals that the Earth can sustain. Even today, across the socialist movement plus the many parts of the environmental movement influenced by traditional leftism there is a deep reluctance to admit, loudly and clearly, the fact that, taken as a whole, human society has reached the point of 'overdevelopment' (instead things are perceived in terms of *maldevelopment*).

Particularly in its Marxist variants, socialist thinking has been shackled to a model of history in which industrialisation was perceived as a massive step forward, breaking the chains of feudalism whilst creating the necessary preconditions for the subsequent advance to Socialism. In 19th century America, for example, socialists denounced craft artisans and small-scale farmers for *opposing* the advent of wage labour and the growth of a propertyless proletariat.

In the main, Marxists and non-Marxists alike could see only inevitability and progress in the fateful shift to a society based on an intense division of labour, large-scale units of production and dependence upon finite and grossly polluting fossil fuels and inorganic minerals. Of course, like many others, socialists have been deeply aware of the terrible social and environmental costs of such 'progress'. However, they blame these ills on capitalist form, not the nature and scale of the productive forces themselves.

## **The Roots of Exploitation and Destruction**

There are further problems that need resolution. One danger with a politics of anti-capitalism is that it encourages a habit of blaming each and every environmental or social ill upon capitalism and capitalism alone. Thus cloak is cast over other dynamics at work. Central to a more rounded analysis is the concept of 'The Tragedy of the Commons'. Sarkar does draw upon this framework in his discussion of the Soviet debacle - this is a very strong section of the book - but it has more general application.

What might better be called the tyranny of commonplace decisions spotlights the cumulative effect of individual actions and the great harm they cause, no matter how well-intended or harmless in themselves. There are many examples of this dynamic. It is especially prevalent in today's anonymous, mass societies, where the sanctions exercised in small-scale communities upon the actions of their members no longer apply (this did serve in the past to protect, to some extent, actual common lands).

Furthermore, given the nature of modern society, individuals are often well insulated in the short-term from the costs of their actions and therefore perceive no reason to moderate wasteful or other anti-social behaviour. This is partly due to a warped fiscal system. It also is encouraged by lives lived inside what are effectively technological cocoons. (A small example is the way that safer cars and roads apparently can encourage more reckless driving !)

Indeed, some of our biggest problems stem not from capitalist profiteering but from more benign motivations. A driving force in overpopulation, for example, has been humanitarian attempts to reduce infant mortality, extend life spans, and overcome limits to child-bearing. At the more mundane level of energy conservation in buildings, many people, especially women working at night, are glad to see lights wastefully left on in empty corridors, simply because they feel safer. Innovations such as high-yielding hybrid plants and CFCs were the product of scientists working for what they perceived to be the common good.

There are in fact countless examples of bad consequences resulting from good intentions. For example, tourism, which is now fast degrading areas that have escaped the worst ravages of industrialised farming and factory development, is driven by the fact that millions

simply want to sun themselves on Florida beaches or ski down the Rocky Mountains. The resultant destruction primarily results from the scale and nature of these activities, not just because it is managed by capitalist tourist operators.

Similarly, undesirable technological changes may be the product of profiteering, market-derived pressures to cut costs or managerial urges to control the workplace more tightly. Yet what turns out to be harmful technological development may also result from other causes. These include the desire for increased safety in the workplace, cleaner and less back-breaking work, or higher quality goods. However, the fundamental driving force, especially in the field of agriculture, simply has been the pressure to cater for more mouths. There is no way, for example, that the 'technologies' of hunting-gathering or slash-and-burn food production could cope with today's populations or supply them, via traditional handicraft, with the volume of consumer goods now demanded in rich and poor countries alike.

Indeed there is a long list of problems *not* caused by private profiteering. The disasters created by government planners in our towns and countryside, for example, cannot be simply put down to the fact that the public professions are in the pockets of private developers and other business interests. A more significant factor has been the influence of various malign theories about modernisation and progress, some of which actually can be traced back to socialist designers, architects and other engineers of social change ("from Bauhaus to our house", as Tom Wolfe once put it).

Indeed, most government ministries and semi-public agencies are possessed of a 'mindset' which is quite inimical to ecological sustainability but which also cannot be linked to any hold over them by big business. Thus, public officials in fields such as food, water and energy production have perceived problems primarily in terms of shortages of supply (as opposed to 'longages' of demand) and, correspondingly, set about generating more production capacity. The hydraulic re-engineering of the American West is but one example. None of these remarks is intended to downplay in any way the sordid back-scratching that goes on between government and private interests such as the weapons industry, energy corporations, ranchers and farmers. The argument is simply that traditional socialist thinking can bring with it a very reductionist and one-dimensional approach.

Generally, many ecological and social problems predate capitalism or have no necessary connection to it or indeed any particular economic order. Back further in pre-history, essentially classless societies drove many species into extinction. In ancient Greece, Plato bemoaned deforestation while, across in China, the seemingly innocent art of calligraphy and associated charcoal burning felled many a tree. In more recent times, the French writer De Tocqueville pointed out how the destruction of North America's fauna and flora by white people went way beyond any rational calculation of private profit, stemming, he argued, from an almost pathological fear of the 'wilderness' they found.

## **Power to the People?**

Ordinary citizens, workers, proletarians or whatever one chooses to label them are not just victims. They often play an active, willing, and conscious part in creating environmental and social problems. For all kinds of reasons - convenience, laziness, ignorance, self-indulgence, comfort, entertainment, safety, security etc. - things are done whose bottom line is exploitation, resource depletion, pollution, and the extermination of wildlife.

Furthermore, and with recent events in Yugoslavia in mind, one must sadly note that those twin evils, warfare and war atrocities have roots that go deeper than either the machinations of arms traders or imperialist plundering. The neighbour next door might be as brutal as the tyrannical despot on some distant throne. Military historians such as John Keegan and Neil Ferguson have demonstrated that such savage impulses are deep-rooted in the human psyche and have scarred all known history. This is not to say that there is something fundamentally evil about human nature. It does, however, suggest that the construction of a decent, caring and sharing society will be a terribly difficult thing to achieve.

Unless such factors are taken into account, policies of 'empowerment', 'direct democracy' and 'workers control' could make matters worse, not better. There are plenty of examples where increased public access has led to great environmental damage or where a popular vote might restore destructive or discriminatory practices. It is not long since public hangings were a popular spectacle. But mainstream socialist theory has had comparatively little to say on the 'dark side' of human behaviour, preferring a romantic vision that The People will be good once their chains have been removed. Such naiveté also pollutes the broad green movement.

The widely used argument, for instance, that 'if we care for people, we will care for the Earth' contains some truth but also a great deal of nonsense.

One last aspect of the socialist theory's proneness to economic reductionism, and very the title of Sarkar's book itself advertises the risk, is a tendency to privilege economic measures *per se* as the way forward. Yet the fundamental solution to the sustainability crisis is likely to be non-economic. In other words, it will be a matter of cultural change which, in turn, will set limits to all kinds of economic institutions and policies. After all, the medieval builders who erected marvels such as Notre Dame did so not because of the workings of the feudal economic system but because of the role of religion in society. A conserver society too will be built, first and foremost, on a new set of 'myths' and taboos, though, in the transition, all kind of measures—educational, regulatory, fiscal and so on—will play a part.

That said, any vision of a sustainable alternative must address practical matters such as pay and differentials. Similarly, the part to be played by government and other public bodies must be identified along with issues such as tax systems and property laws. Some sections of the green movement, not least 'deep ecology' circles, become very hazy when it comes to solid issues such as economic policy. They seem more comfortable when dealing with values and broad goals rather than the 'nitty gritty'. Sarkar's explorations of the conserver alternative is, therefore, a healthy antidote to academic philosophising. More practically, victories in conserving biodiversity and wilderness will come to nothing if the economic system remains one which continually stokes the fires of their destruction.

## Overpopulation

Possible incompatibilities between Socialism and EcoCentrism become clearer when it comes to specific points of analysis and policy. Most notable is the debate about overpopulation. Socialists—and feminists plus, amazingly, many 'greens'—have long denounced those who dare to suggest that the current, let alone projected, population levels are unsustainable, despite a mountain of hard evidence to the contrary. It is truly incredible how many people think that human numbers do not count. Similarly, there is a widespread opposition on principle to any form of restriction on population movement, even though many local environments and economies now cannot cope with the pressures generated by incoming settlers or even short stay visitors.

In particular, Socialist writers cling to what might be called the 'distributionist fallacy', namely that all would be well if only things, primarily food, were shared out equally. The American scientist and socialist Barry Commoner is only one of many left-wing theorists who claim that the world can cope perfectly well with its human burden, providing rational planning replaces the 'anarchy' of the market. Similarly, population policies have often been attacked on principle. Communist leaders such as Fidel Castro and Mao Tse Tung were in the vanguard of those who denounced family planning as an imperialist conspiracy.

Such is the influence of the socialist argument (plus, perhaps, elements of intellectual flabbiness and moral cowardice) that organisations like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have failed to produce serious publications or policy statements addressing the threat from overpopulation. Nor do most of them employ full-time campaign staff to work on this issue. Similarly, the problems posed by migration patterns are ignored and even denied, leaving the field open to racist agitators. Sarkar recognises the unsustainability of current demographic trends that the problem is more serious than even he is prepared to recognise.

## Science & Technology

Blinkers about overpopulation are not the only fly in the socialist ointment. There is a strong strain of 'technological utopianism' present in much left-wing thinking on the appliance of science. The socialist tradition largely has seen technology as a neutral tool; any downside simply stemming from its ownership and the way it has been deployed. Furthermore, according to most leftists, not just Marxists, it is the capitalist relations of production that fetter the forces of production. As Sarkar recognises, it was simply assumed that public ownership and socialist planning would unlock this potential.

Generally, socialists have stressed the need for 'alternative plans' for *existing* plant and production processes. They fail to see, for example, that armoured cars and ambulances still clock up the same ecological bills, although they may possess somewhat different 'use' or indeed 'exchange' values.

Indeed, there are many other differences in analysis and policy between the socialist and ecocentric standpoints which there is not space to discuss. One which ought to be mentioned, however, given the current debates about European Union and devolution, is the issue of

political frameworks and particularly of boundaries. Socialist thought has swung back and forth from notions of a United Socialist States of Europe and even World Government to the advocacy of radical decentralism.

What is lacking in socialist theory and policy—and what will be critical over the next century—is the challenge of harmonising politico-administrative structures with the biogeography of flora, fauna, water flows and land form, plus those sustainable human cultural patterns which have grown alongside them, in a word ‘bioregionalism’. Sarkar skates past this important issue, apart from some general remarks about the dangers of globalisation. Fortunately, he is too sensible to fall for the trap of seeing the solution for every problem in terms of a radical, one-way, unconditional devolution, what might be called the ‘cult of localism’.

## **Prolecut**

Another aspect of Socialism which Sarkar again underestimates is what might be called ‘workerism’. Traditionally, the socialist model of agency and social change has been based on the allegedly progressive potential of the ‘workers’ and the ‘class struggle’. This perspective in turn depends upon the assumption that, basically, economic position shapes consciousness and, in turn, behaviour.

In reality, there is no intrinsic reason why those from the ranks of the exploited or the oppressed are actually, or potentially, more responsible, sensitive, caring or active than people from other social backgrounds. Contrary to socialist theory, especially Marxism, most great changes in history have cut across any borders of social stratification, not along them. Sometimes members of the same family have found themselves on different sides of the barricades as happened in the American Civil War.

However, since the 60s, some sections of the Left, often in tandem with many feminists, have written off the traditional labour movement and, instead, look to the more overtly downtrodden for salvation. Some saw the Third World poor or the socially excluded and victimised groups inside the heartlands of industrialism as the basis for new political movements. Amongst socialist grouplets, it is often takes the form of a turn to ‘youth’.

The toiling masses, workers or peasants, employed or unemployed, have proved remarkably resistant to socialist propaganda. Here we come to another problem with socialist theory, which, again, Sarkar tends to downplay. It is also one that many greens endorse. Ordinary people, it is argued, are duped into thinking and doing things against their own interest. The finger of guilt is most often pointed at ‘capitalist schooling’ and the mass media, especially advertising. The theory, however, cannot explain why some people miraculously escape such brain washing. Furthermore, all the evidence suggests that receivers of communication, be it from teachers or from the TV set, play a much more active part in selecting and interpreting the messages they receive than left-wing theorists recognise.

In reality, people are much more complex than socialist theory recognises, with many roles (at work or play, in the home or the neighbourhood, in fantasy or actuality etc.) and with equally complicated (and often contradictory) beliefs and patterns of behaviour. Similarly, the influence of the education system, the media and other agents of socialisation is far from simple (which is not to suggest that it is non-existent nor to deny that it represents a very formidable obstacle).

## **All relative**

Presumably Sarkar’s main experience of the socialist movement was a good few years ago. I wonder whether he underestimates how much it has changed in character. In recent years, a strong strain of individualism and social permissiveness has gripped the socialist movement (and many greens as well). It attacks any notion of set standards and values as *ipso facto* judgmental, if not actively authoritarian and repressive. Any criticism of minority groups is denounced as ‘blaming the victim’. An all-pervading relativism infuses such thought, especially its cultural theory. Values and lifestyles are treated as purely personal, contextual and transitory. American academic thought in particular has been polluted by such thinking.

Central is the refusal to make judgements about the working class, women, non-white races, ‘ethnic’ cultures, indeed anyone deemed to be disadvantaged by the structures around them and thereby absolved from responsibility for their actions. The riots that periodically erupt in British and American cities, for example, have been portrayed in the left-wing press as veritable festivals of the oppressed. No distinction is drawn between legitimate political protest and sheer lawlessness. Similarly, a veil is drawn over the social oppression and environmental destructiveness inherent in some ‘Third World’ cultures.

For these reasons, the socialist movement has been unwilling, perhaps unable, to assess critically contemporary social changes, except to blame any problems on public spending cutbacks and capitalism in general. Developments such as the rise of the single parent family are treated instead as simply facets of an evolving society. In some instances, socialist theorists have defended features of industrialised lifestyles such as the round-the-clock-TV, fast food and shopping malls as authentic expressions of popular culture, even centres of 'resistance' to the dominant order. (One even argued that those who do not watch soap operas are 'culturally deprived').

The label 'élitist' is firmly pinned on anyone who dares to suggest that there might be outstanding individuals or externally derived standards of excellence against which junk culture etc. might be unfavourably compared. There is little time in this brand of politics for old-fashioned critics like the British academic Richard Hoggart, who, to the horror of the anti-élitists, recently observed sadly that "only a minority can read at all if 'to read' means more than occasionally skimming over two-syllabled words about trivial matters".

More generally, the rhetoric of equality and empowerment, which increasingly dominates the voice of Socialism, means more personal entitlements, not greater accountability for one's actions—in all circumstances. As a result, there is a marked tendency to draw up ever-lengthening shopping lists of human rights, something which also besets the green movement (witness demands to set a proposed level of citizens basic income funded from the public purse with no reference to the state of the economy, let alone ecology).

## Red and Green

Given all the above divisions - and there are more - it might be concluded that many issues need to be resolved if there is to be a meaningful cross-fertilisation between Socialism and EcoCentrism. Despite all the efforts of magazines like *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism* to green the reds, perusal of the literature now circulating in Far Left groups and in the socialist fringe of Labour/Social Democratic Parties suggests that, so far, any greening has been rather skin deep.

However, the project Sarkar advocates is a worthwhile one. A great deal can be learned from socialist theory about the social dimensions of a conserver society. Certainly Sarkar's stress on social solidarity must be taken on board. With writers such as Andrew McLaughlin, he spotlights what ecological movements beneficially might adopt from the socialist tradition. The studies of Los Angeles by Mike Davis, for example, illustrate how a sensitive use of socialist perspectives can illuminate our understanding of contemporary ills.

Just as valuable are Sarkar's criticisms of extant green theory. Two are especially important. First is his critique of a certain irrationalism that pervades much green writing. Quite rightly he stresses that a politics of sustainability is not 'anti-technology' nor is it anti-science. In the latter case, he takes to task writers such as Vandana Shiva. There is a thin line between, on the one hand, sensitivity to the limits of scientific methodology not least its misapplication in areas where it is inappropriate ('scientism'), and, on the other, insensitivity to the many great lessons that science can teach us. Many of the points that Sokal rightly has made about Postmodernism might be applied to much green thinking too (see Sokal and Bricmont's important critique, *Intellectual Impostures*).

Second is Sarkar's rejection of what he calls a politics of 'cultural identity' (I prefer 'radical nostalgia'), the romanticising of tribal and other 'vernacular' cultures. It represents a real trap. Many pre-industrial peoples, for example, wiped out whole species and engaged in some horrible social practices. Yet in the writings of, say, Teddy Goldsmith, there is almost a compulsive urge to sing the praises of primal peoples. Apart from anything else, it makes it easy for critics to attack ecologists for wanting to return to the Stone Age. In any case, there is no going back: society can only go forward. Many institutions and technologies of a conserver society will be far from traditional and require much innovative thinking (which certainly be informed by each and every lesson to be drawn from past human experience).

It might be said, however, that Sarkar bends the proverbial stick too far the other way. Indeed at times he comes close to a cultural relativism in which culture becomes a matter of preference, something to be made and remade as people see fit. Yet an ecologically sustainable social order would set parameters for local cultures and everyday lifestyles. Raymond Dasmann, for example, once distinguished 'ecosystem people', mainly past cultures, from today's dominant 'biosphere people'. The latter's ecological 'footprint' (or, rather, jackboot) is a global one. Ecosystem people, by contrast, depended directly and intimately upon the local ecosystem, its soils, plants, wildlife, waters. Though they shared this fundamental

characteristic, the relationship created a diversity of cultures since ecosystems too are characterised by great variety—mountains and plains, grasslands and forests, deserts and tundra, coastlines and islands.

A shift towards ecological sustainability necessarily would involve a process of cultural 'rehabitation' as we begin not only to cherish and protect but also adapt to the specifics of place, to the distinct regions formed by geology, climate and living creatures. As writers such as Hassan Fathy and others have spotlighted, some traditional architectural styles, for example, reflected that adaptation. The same can be said of numerous cuisines, clothing and many other aspects of life. An ecologically shaped culture would not be as pluralist as Sarkar suggests. Ecology means saying 'no' as much as saying 'yes'!

## **Old Before Their Time**

Then there is one big problem area which Sarkar completely ignores. Without wishing to sound rude (and writing as someone in his late 50s), I wonder whether this omission might reflect the fact that Sarkar is no longer a young man. It concerns the frightening degeneration of contemporary mass culture and especially so-called 'youth culture'. Many radical movements have drawn upon younger members of society, whose critical sensibilities, idealistic impulses and sheer physical energy predisposed many of them in such a direction. However, in recent years there has been a dramatic shift in the life experiences and consequently the attitudes and behaviours of the young. Reared in homes often little better than electronic cages, zapping and zipping across MTV, games consoles and video machines, their grasp of reality is declining as fast as their capacity to pay attention for any length of time. Whole areas of real life are written off as 'boring'. 'Virtual reality' technologies will make the problem much worse.

Furthermore, many of today's youth soak up 'club culture' with a vengeance. They live for the weekend. They are more concerned about the latest styles than the state of the planet. They show little interest in collective forms of struggle like trade unionism. They often find it difficult to separate fantasy and reality. Indeed, many think, talk and act like soap opera characters (the author writes as a teacher of 16-18 yr. olds in a Further Education college). At the same time, formal education today is largely devoted to random bite-size scraps of information served up as if learning were like dining in a fast-food cafeteria.

Furthermore many young people today are culturally adrift from any roots. A recent study, for example, compared modern back-packers with their predecessors of the 60s and found that today's horde has little interest in the cultures of the places on which they descend. They are just like other tourists except that they want to save some money. They are a cause, not just an effect, of cultural homogenisation.

A sense of place is lacking as is a sense of time. Many young people also cannot see beyond the 'present, lacking the sensitivity to the past or the future necessary for ecological sensibility. Generally, consumerism and a selfish hedonism have dug their claws as never before in human consciousness and it bodes ill for the kind of conserver ethic Sarkar rightly proposes.

Of course, there are sweeping generalisations and there has always been a tendency amongst older people to bemoan 'young people today'. Labels like 'Generation X' unfairly stereotype whole social groups. Certainly there are plenty of exceptions to the above picture. Many activists in anti-globalisation, animal rights and other such campaigns, for example, are people in their late teens and 20s. At the very least we should beware naive thinking that there is an up and coming 'green generation' about to take over from their elders.

## **Green: What Does It Mean?**

Last but not least there is the problem of what is meant by words like 'green' and 'eco'. Here too Sarkar remains a sure-footed guide, though there are some critical issues he passes by. In a major chapter on the 'Natural Resource Base of the Economy', he provides a clear exposition in the ecological foundations of human wealth. Yet he makes only passing reference to wilderness protection and wildlife conservation. Most significantly he ignores the body of thought built around Aldo Leopold's term the Land Ethic (in which as the late and great Canadian writer Stan Rowe well argued, 'land' should be taken in the broadest sense, the whole ecological — biological and physical — community, not just individual organisms).

I would argue that the kernel of 'real' greenery is recognition is that people are viewed, not as 'conquerors of nature, but as plain members and citizens of it', as Leopold put it. Such EcoCentrism puts first the Earth and its life-support systems, on which depend many species, not just people. This 'outer' framework should guide how think we think about, value and do

things. This approach is diametrically opposed to today's individualistic and often narcissistic focus. Here the critique of the 'arrogance of humanism' by the likes of Ehrenfeld and Livingston is particularly important.

In one case, I find that Sarkar makes a mountain out of the molehill. It concerns the issue of 'anthropocentrism'. Of course we are all humans and, to that extent, limited by our own being. Yet there is a world of difference between those on the one hand who would destroy the last habitat of, say, turtles, to throw up yet one more hotel, and those, on the other, who would forego that 'pleasure' for the sake of conserving our fellow species. In practice, distinctions between anthropocentrism and an ecocentric alternative are not difficult to delineate.

The very title of Sarkar's book prompts some final thoughts. The very word 'Socialism' will put off many potential sympathisers who, for justified reasons or otherwise, may be put off the connotations it evokes. More importantly, to locate the movement for ecological sustainability on but one part of the old political spectrum is to narrow the scope for new alliances. A broader constituency is needed to build a conserver society.

Within the conservative tradition, it is not difficult to find individuals whose ideas can be linked to an ecological sensibility (see examples in Ophuls' *Requiem for Modern Politics*). It is possible to find ecological wisdom in conservative values such as prudence, continuity and the need for transcendent ultimate values. The English thinker Edmund Burke, then, may have as much to offer as, say, Karl Marx. So too have some 'bourgeois liberals' particularly John Stuart Mill. More importantly, there are many more thinkers who defy any easy labelling but whose ideas are vitally important: George Marsh, John Muir, and Paul Sears, for instance. It might be wiser to drop the language of past political debates and strive for new words and phrases around which to build that broad movement. That said, certain fundamental issues, not the least the nature of a sustainable economic system, cannot be avoided and Sarkar has done a great service in shedding so much light on those questions.

Overall, Sarkar is right to insist on the historical importance of Socialism. Amongst socialists as individuals, there is often a deep sense of justice and burning anger against oppression and exploitation. Many of the great struggles against those evils at home and abroad have been led by socialist groups. They have also played an inestimable role in stressing the importance of equity and compassion when it comes to matters like population control. Yet, as an ideology and an overall programme, Socialism has much baggage to discard if it is to be relevant to the challenge of the next century.

**Sandy Irvine**