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**SOCIAL ECOLOGY**

It is difficult to separate Social Ecology from the work of the social theorist Murray Bookchin. Having elaborated its philosophical foundations in a dozen books and many essays, he is considered by many to be the founder of the field. Bookchin drew on history, anthropology, philosophy, political theory, and ecology to formulate a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between humanity and nature, the causes of the ecological crisis, and the pathways humanity could reinstate to create an ecologically sustainable and just world (Bookchin 1982, 1986, 1995, 2003).

**DEFINING THE TRADITION**

The Social Ecologist John Clark has argued that although Social Ecology is associated closely with Bookchin’s work, it is part of a long philosophical tradition (Clark 1998). Clark creatively traced—or, as Andrew Light (1998) described it, creatively invented—the intellectual tradition that preceded Social ecology. Among its forerunners was the anarchist Petr Kropotkin with his emphasis on the significance of “mutual aid” among animals and humans and model of a human society organized in communities founded on cooperation and free from central government (Kropotkin 1887). The geographer and anarchist Elisée Reclus, a colleague of Kropotkin’s, prefaced ideas of Social Ecology in envisioning the reorganization of societies into communities embedded within their ecological and geographic regions (Clark and Martin 2004). The historian and social theorist Lewis Mumford may be regarded as an early Social Ecologist for his analysis of the way mechanization and domination lead to the dissolution of human ties to the natural world (Mumford 1967). Bookchin contributed the most elaborate articulation of Social Ecology: His argument, which continues to stand as the central pillar of Social Ecology, is that the destruction of nature originated in hierarchical and class-structured social domination among humans (Bookchin 1982).

**WHAT IS SOCIAL ECOLOGY?**

Clark’s description of Social Ecology as “the awakening earth community reflecting on itself, uncovering its history, exploring its present predicament, and contemplating its future” highlights its general threads and calls attention to its predilection for theorizing nature and society as a unity (Clark 1998, p. 416). More specifically, key themes and arguments of Social Ecology include the following:

- Viewing nature and society as emerging through an evolutionary unfolding toward increasing diversity, complexity, freedom, and consciousness by means of processes that foundationally involve interconnection, complementarity, and cooperation;
- Understanding the relationship between nature and society as a holistic unity in diversity and seeking to discover why this relationship has gone awry; regarding social conditions and structures as the causes of the detrimental impact of humanism on nature;
- Critiquing institutionalized forms of dominance, both hierarchical and class-based, not only from a social-justice perspective but also for being causally implicated in ecological destruction;
- Privileging social-structural explanations of ecological disruptions over biological and/or psychospiritual explanatory frameworks such as human population growth and human chauvinism;
- Assessing the capitalist market economy as the major force behind intensifying ecological problems;
- Identifying capitalism as an economy, way of life, and thought style that has colonized every aspect of human life and the natural world;
- Agitating for the revolutionary abolition of all forms of domination rather than seeking reformist solutions to social and ecological problems or encouraging individual spiritual transformation;
- Urging the realization of freedom for both people and nature;
- Providing a vision of the ecological society to counter the dominance of the economism (the hegemony of the market economy) that is destroying the biosphere.
Slum District in Manila, Philippines. A group of children in the district of Baseco in Manila play near their shanty house, which contrasts sharply with the homes being built by Habitat for Humanity and workers behind them. According to principles of Social Ecology, ecological problems cannot be separated from social inequality and economic exploitation. In a similar vein, Social Ecologists would say that ecological destruction cannot be ended until hierarchy and class structure are abolished. [JOEL NITO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES.

According to Social Ecologists, the human-nature relationship is formed through the structural and conceptual relations that predominate in any society. The drive to dominate nature originated in and is perpetuated by the human domination of humans. Social domination is organized along lines of hierarchy and class stratification. Hierarchy involves the valorization and institutionalization of human differences (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.), and class divisions are based on unequal ownership or control of material wealth and means of production. Both forms of domination underlie the destruction of nature, for it is only when differential status, master-servant relationships, and economic exploitation emerge in the social world that human beings direct related ideas and actions to the world of landscapes, animals, and plants. Ecological problems never have been separate from social inequity and economic exploitation, and the ecological crisis cannot be resolved without a revolutionary restructuring of society on the economic, political, cultural, and value levels.

In making the case for the causal primacy of social structure in the way nature is treated, Social Ecologists echo a long-standing sociological predilection for viewing social patterns as being projected onto nonsocial domains, especially the realms of gods and nature. Within any society all its dimensions are aligned through the structural and ideological mappings that the sociologist Max Weber characterized as manifesting “elective affinity.” Thus, societies stratified through systems of domination project a blueprint of stratification onto the natural world, representing it as a domain inferior to humanity. That projection makes nature available for many forms of physical domination: destruction of habitats, conversion of ecosystems, ownership of land,
exploitation of life forms, and experimentation on animals as well as the overarching constitution of the nonhuman world as a realm for instrumental use.

The upshot of this analysis is that ending ecological destruction hinges on abolishing domination in society. This analysis may explain why the contemporary environmental movement, along with the earlier work of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, has been unable to turn things around. From a social-ecological standpoint, the creation of an ecological society requires nothing less than the emergence of an emancipated humanity that abandons hierarchical valuations and economic inequalities, charting instead a new historical course for both humans and nature into realms of creativity and freedom.

Although the destruction of nature did not originate with industrialism but has roots in the earliest forms of hierarchy (especially patriarchy), Social Ecologists indict the market economy as the major force behind the ecological crisis. Steven Best stated that for Social Ecology "environmental problems emerge from a long history of hierarchical social relations that culminate in a class-ridden, profit-driven, accumulation-oriented capitalist society" (Best 1998, p. 337). In its addiction to limitless growth the market economy, especially "the horror of economistic-technocratic globalism" (Clark 1998, p. 429) that it has turned into, is jeopardizing the integrity of the biosphere as a whole.

From the point of view of Social Ecology, economic expansionism is leading to the colonization of all worlds: natural, social, cultural, and personal. Evangelism homogenizes and impoverishes the natural world while degrading human relations and experiences into commodities. Evangelism also has co-opted the Enlightenment concept of progress as social development that unfolds through competition and expansionism rather than through cooperation and balance. Social Ecologists do not regard the negative impact of industrialism as stemming from either technological development or cultural-ideological contrivances such as commodity fetishism that sustain overproduction but instead from an economic system founded on the "the universal reign of limitless buying and selling, indeed, of limitless growth and expansion" (Bookchin 1986, pp. 28–29). This imperative renders capitalism nearly impervious to ethical considerations and unmarks the idea of "greening capitalism" as an oxymoron if not an Orwellian smoke screen (Bookchin 1993).

Diagnosing socioeconomic forms of domination as the source of ecological destruction presents Social Ecology with the task of envisioning an alternative way of life: the ecological society. The future ecological society is portrayed as organized in ecocommunities that will be egalitarian, democratic and participatory, and semi-autonomous but interconnected. Such networked communities will live in balance—both knowledge-based and heartfelt—with their ecological regions. In the ecological society people will integrate ethical considerations into their energy choices, forms of land use, and treatment of animals. Economics will be human-scaled. In the creation and exchange of objects craft will be valued over mass production, durability over constant turnover, and simple lifestyles over consumption (Biehl 1998).

The ethos of the ecological society is envisioned as cooperative with respect to people, animals, and the land. Because cooperative relationships are ontologically primary in evolutionary, ecological, and social processes, the ecological society is conceived as a realizable and actionable vision rather than a utopian will-o'-the-wisp. The creation of a social world rooted in the praxis and ethic of mutualism is theorized as restoring the primal and ever-present, even when repressed and marginalized, ground of being (Clark 1998).

THE COSMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Even as Social Ecology has problematized material relations within economic, political, and sociocultural systems of domination, it has articulated a cosmological context for the emergence of humanity within an evolving universe and biosphere; the rupture between humanity and nature that has culminated in the ecological crisis is scrutinized in the same context. The materialism of Social Ecology is thus a far cry from the materialism of European and American Marxist and anarchist traditions, which shy away from theorizing the universe at large and the Earth in particular as manifestations of a cosmos of intrinsic integrity, beauty, and order. Bookchin in particular elaborated those cosmological foundations for Social Ecology, relying on dialectical naturalism to represent society as an emergent of nature and redeem the human-nature relationship (in its original unity and future potential) as complementary, harmonious, and mutually supportive. The framework of dialectical naturalism allowed him to tap into an established philosophical tradition while signaling his divergence from Hegel's Christian idealism and Marx's anthropocentric materialism.

Bookchin portrayed natural history as grading into social history without sacrificing the distinctive qualities of either domain. Everything that is characteristically or quintessentially human, from the development of science and technology to the creation of cities, the invention of writing, and the composition of music, has been cons in the making (Bookchin 1993). The peculiar qualities of human beings, such as the capacity for reason and self-consciousness, sophisticated language, the aspiration to freedom, and the power to innovate and intervene, have
emerged through and as a form of biological evolution. Social Ecology thus affirms nature and society as a continuum, or a "differentiated unity" (Bookchin 1996): This perspective opposes lifting humanity into a realm above the natural world but also objects to conflating society and nature by discounting the unique features of humanity.

Bookchin coined the terms first nature (the natural world) and second nature (human society) to underscore their similarity and divergence. The rise of domination within second nature has had dire repercussions for first nature and for society's relationship with it: The schisms and alienation created within society echo a human schism and alienation from the natural world, and the abuses inflicted on people are all easily directed at nonhumans. By overcoming the distortions arising from social domination, a dialectical unfolding can lead humanity and nature into a higher synthesis, a liberated coexistence that Bookchin called free nature (Bender 2003).

In remaining vague about the meaning of free nature, Bookchin skirted an important issue: the substantive contours of the relationship between second nature and first nature in the ecological society. Clark endeavored to correct this by unpacking Bookchin's free nature in connection with the issues of biodiversity and wilderness protection:

The social-ecological conception of freedom as spontaneous creative order points to the need for a larger sphere of wild nature so that biodiversity can be maintained and evolutionary processes can continue their self-expression, not only in human culture and humanized nature, but also in the natural world substantially free of human influence and control. A Social Ecology therefore implies the necessity not only for wilderness preservation but also for an extensive expansion of wilderness (and relative wilderness) areas where they have been largely destroyed. (Clark 1998, p. 430)

This passage points to the attempt to harmonize free nature with key themes of environmental thought; it also represents an attempt to begin reconciling social-ecological and deep-ecological perspectives.

Human society is born out of the natural world in a biological sense but also in the ancient and originally egalitarian structuring of human relations along kinship lines, a sexual division of labor, and rights and obligations of different age groups (Bookchin 1982). Although all human qualities exist in inchoate form in first nature, second nature has evolved an unparalleled potential aptitude for rationality, self-consciousness, and intentionality. For Bookchin the deepest realization of these abilities requires freedom, but freedom has been stilled by social domination in all its forms: status distinctions, patriarchy, racism, tribalism, economic exploitation, discrimination against minorities, and state oppression. The future of both humanity and the biosphere depends on establishing the freedom within which the highest human qualities can become actualized. Bookchin tends to echo a Nietzschean assessment of human beings as an unrealized but promise-filled species hovering between ape and superman: grown beyond unselfconscious animal but not yet nature rendered self-conscious.

Bookchin attempted to sustain first nature and second nature as a continuum while honoring the qualities that make the human phenomenon unique. By underscoring positive features of humanity such as the celebration of freedom, the cultivation of reason, and the aspiration to self-consciousness, he seems to have had a twofold goal: to preempt a conscious or subterranean response of misanthropy to the ecological damage human beings have wrought and to highlight the human qualities that can be actualized after the relational and mental shackles of domination are undone and the way to the ecological society is opened.

CRITICISMS

The social-ecological preoccupation with human uniqueness has been criticized, especially by Deep Ecologists, as an expression of human chauvinism or anthropocentrism (Bender 2003). Passages in Bookchin's work in which he draws sharp lines between human nature and all other animals invite that critique. To get a theoretically tidy distinction between first nature and second nature, Bookchin tended to oversimplify animal life as one of fixed instincts and genetic programs while exulting humanity as epitomizing the achievements of reasoning, self-consciousness, intentional planning, and behavioral plasticity. However, a dualistic frame of this type is empirically problematic because it ignores advances in behavioral ecology and cognitive ethology that reveal the complexities of animal life and ethically problematic because it underwrites a human-supremacist argument.

The motive behind such dualistic maneuvers is to avoid naturalizing the ecological crisis by anchoring it in biological programs or regarding it as a consequence of Darwinian processes. After hypothesizing the distinction between human beings and animals, Bookchin and other Social Ecologists exercise terms such as hierarchy, domination, competition, and slavery from animal relations. When that terminology is applied to the natural world, domination of people and nature (and ultimately human colonization of the biosphere) can appear legitimated as an extension of biological basics. Thus, Bookchin's attempt to distinguish humanity from the rest of the animal kingdom allowed him to pathologize domination as a pure sociocultural phenomenon and at the same time
exonerate first nature from the vices of inequity, exploitation, oppression, and subservience.

Although Bookchin’s critics often deplore the sharp line he drew between humans and animals, they rarely give him and other Social Ecologists credit for defending the natural world against its historical and recent constructions as blind, mute, cruel, selfish, competitive, and stingy. Countering the ideological fiction of nature as “demonic and hostile” (Bookchin 1986), Bookchin insisted on an understanding of the natural world as creative, pregnant, fecund, participatory, relational, and wondrous (Bookchin 1986, Clark 1998).

Social Ecology propounds a philosophy of all phenomena as interrelated, jointly enhancing, and mutually forming through symbiotic and cooperative processes. Within that framework the destructiveness of domination is conceived of as fortuitous, a possible historical trajectory but not an essential or necessary characteristic of the world. The cosmology of Social Ecology is thus openly spiritual in offering a vision of the good and goodness as primary forces and in affirming evolutionary emergence in the universe and the biosphere as a creative, awe-inspiring process, though not one conceived as either supernaturally designed or with a predetermined telos. As Clark noted about the implications of this cosmology for a possible future, “the ecological society that is the goal of Social Ecology is found to be rooted in the most basic levels of being” (Clark 1998, p. 421). For Social Ecologists, in a just and ecologically harmonious world, humanity will return to a primordial condition, but this will involve the restoration of the original essence and potential of humankind, not the reinstatement of the Stone Age or the Pleistocene.

THE CLASH BETWEEN SOCIAL ECOLOGY AND DEEP ECOLOGY

Despite Bookchin’s theoretical brilliance, decades of activism and writing, and comprehensive formulation of Social Ecology, his divisiveness marred his contribution and damaged the ecological cause. His sectarianism manifested itself in his attack on Deep Ecology during the 1980s and 1990s. The ensuing conflict between Deep Ecology and Social Ecology contributed to polarizing the environmental movement into nature and social justice camps, the very schism that Bookchin was striving to supersede (Best 1998, Light 1998, Clark 2000).

Deep Ecology emerged with the work of the Norwegian ecophilosopher Arne Naess and evolved into the Deep Ecology movement through the contributions of American and Australian environmental thinkers and activists. The underlying cause of ecological destruction and of the alienation of the human species from the biosphere is identified by Deep Ecologists as anthropocentrism: the self-exultation of human beings, whose ostensible superiority and perceived entitlements sanction domination over nature. In the culture at large anthropocentrism manifests itself as the pervasive and often unquestioned belief that nature is a domain to be used, a domain primarily of instrumental value for people.

In an effort to recover traditions of thought and practice that transcend anthropocentrism, foster biospheric egalitarianism, and celebrate the intrinsic value of nature, Deep Ecologists have formulated a syncretic platform that has integrated elements of Western philosophy, scientific ecology, conservation biology, humanistic psychology, primitive ritual, and Eastern spirituality. These syntheses are used in an attempt to recover a biocentric sensibility that counters the supremacist tendencies of Homo sapiens with a vision of harmonious coexistence with all beings. In the idiom of Aldo Leopold, Deep Ecologists agitate for the day when human beings will be “plain members and citizens” rather than conquerors of the land community.

Bookchin disparaged deep-ecological thought as a random collage of ideas that was deplorable in its theoretical incoherence, mystical inclinations, inattention to social-justice issues, and denial of social domination as the root of ecological exploitation and destruction. He considered Deep Ecological philosophy a hodgepodge of Taoist moods, Buddhist homilies, and New Age platitudes, with Spinoza, Whitehead, and Heidegger thrown into the mix, that displaces the “vigor of reasoning” and “muscularity of thought” of Western philosophical and political traditions (Bookchin 1996, p. 98ff). Bookchin’s criticisms might have inspired a dialogue between Deep Ecology and Social Ecology, but his invective proved more polarizing than constructive. The tendentious tone that Bookchin set can be seen in a deep-ecological backlash that finds little if anything to learn from his ideas.

In focusing on what repelled him in deep-ecological literature—especially appeals to spiritual transformation, invocations of mystical unity, and antirationalism—Bookchin failed to acknowledge important convergences between Deep Ecology and Social Ecology (Clark 2000). Deep Ecology has always stressed the idea that creating a balanced world will necessitate profound changes at the economic, political, cultural, and ideological levels. Social Ecologists similarly insist that real transformation will not occur without reimagining and revolutionizing all dimensions of society. Concurring with social-ecological analyses, Deep Ecologists have not shied away from criticizing capitalist wasteful production as well as the consumer culture that both is spawned by overproduction and feeds it (Rozsak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995). Social Ecology and Deep Ecology share a broad vision of the ecological society, highlighting the desirability of local governance and democratic decision making.
small-scale economies of production and consumption, community spirit, lifestyles that respect cultural and natural diversity, ecological embeddedness, and care of non-human species both for the ways they enhance human life and for their intrinsic value.

The legacy of Social Ecology for the environmental movement and the future directions of social-ecological thought are not known. It is unclear whether Social Ecology will thrive as an ecophilosophy in its own right, whether its insights will be absorbed into new syntheses in environmental thought and activism, or whether the term Social Ecology will end up being applied only to analyses narrowly focused on social-justice concerns in environmental and ecological contexts. Murray Bookchin died in 2006. In the years before his death his polemics alienated him from many of his contemporaries. However, the key insights of Social Ecology continue to command attention: Social and ecological problems are inseparable, and social domination has long been implicated in the destruction of the biosphere.

SEE ALSO Animal Ethics; Biocentrism; Bookchin, Murray; Darwin, Charles; Deep Ecology; Ecological Feminism; Ecology II: Community Ecology; Environmental Justice; Environmental Philosophy: V. Contemporary Philosophy; Land Ethics; Leopold, Aldo; Naess, Arne.

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SOCIETY FOR CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), established in 1986, seeks to promote the scientific study of issues pertaining to the loss, maintenance, and restoration of biodiversity. The SCB and its flagship journal, Conservation Biology, bring together scientists, scholars, policy makers, and members of nongovernmental organizations who share the goal of protecting and perpetuating the earth’s biological diversity. Since its inception the SCB has recognized an essential role for environmental ethics in informing, shaping, and applying the science of conservation biology. Conversely, ideas and insights from conservation biology have contributed to the development of environmental philosophy and ethics.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

The SCB was founded in 1986 in response to the increasingly urgent concern over global threats to biological diversity in the late twentieth century. More broadly, however, the emergence of conservation biology as a new interdisciplinary field reflected long-term trends in conservation science and practice. A concern with biological diversity has deep roots in the worldviews of native cultures around the world; in the scientific tradition of Europe and North America (in the fundamental contributions, for example, of Linnaeus, Charles Darwin, and Alfred Russel Wallace); and in the work of naturalists and protoconservationists of the 1800s (the writings, for example, of Alexander von Humboldt, Henry David Thoreau, and George Perkins Marsh). With the rise of the Progressive-Era conservation movement in the United States in the early 1900s, science became more intimately tied to conservation policy and practice. It