

Harvey can only gesture to a rather inchoate "politics of possibility" — is perhaps symptomatic. For however "imperative" meta-theoretical inquiry may be for contemporary radical environmentalism, it can only help change, rather than merely understand, the world if we fully appreciate a vital fact: that one of its conditions of possibility is the institutional space afforded by the modern university. What this means (and this is an issue Harvey conspicuously avoids) is that the kind of "work" theory can do — in this case to engender a scale politics of nature — is necessarily circumscribed by the difficulties of reaching out from the academy to other actors in other sites. We surely need a more nuanced sense of these difficulties if arguments of the kind Harvey has offered us are to make any difference at all. — Noel Castree

Hesitations before Ecology: David Harvey's Dilemma

Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference is an ambitious work that considers everything from dialectics to globalization. It is a difficult book to assess because over the course of much if not most of the work Harvey deliberately avoids the closures — not just in concepts but in arguments and synthetic vision as well — that characterize most analytical work, almost as if he wants to preserve the kind of unresolved social, historical and ecological tensions that he so admires in Raymond Williams' novels. The value of this work lies not in its argument or its overall conclusions (which are difficult to ascertain, at best) but in the fact that Harvey, imbued with a socialist and dialectical perspective, probes everywhere, questions everything, often providing powerful insights — without however arriving at any definite destination.

Rather than considering this book as a whole, then, I would like to comment on one central aspect of it, running throughout — the relation between socialism and ecology. In doing so I will avoid as much as possible any discussion of Harvey's comments on my own work, which I have answered elsewhere.¹ Instead, I shall focus more broadly on what I think are the characteristic features of Harvey's approach and what they mean for those engaged in the overlapping struggles over socialism and environmentalism.

¹See the exchange between Harvey and myself in *Monthly Review*, April, 1998.

Raymond Williams, who did so much to promote the idea of socialist ecology, wrote in 1986 that "The strongest organized hesitation before socialism [among contemporary popular movements] is perhaps the diverse movement variously identified as 'ecology' or the 'the greens.'"² It struck me in reading Harvey's book that he is quite fixated on the extent to which environmentalists and greens can be seen as constituting an "organized hesitation before socialism" in this sense. So much so that, in Harvey's case, this negative assessment threatens to turn into its opposite: a socialist hesitation before environmentalism. Unable to arrive at any immediate dialectical synthesis that would bridge these differences, and impatient with those attempts that have already been made, we see Harvey struggling throughout his work to explore every aspect of this set of complex relations.

The only material basis for a praxis that would unite the two movements, Harvey seems to believe, is represented by the environmental justice movement of recent years (a conclusion that I too have tentatively advanced).³ But Harvey is too acute an observer to fail to recognize the extent to which that movement still falls short of the wider concerns of both socialism and environmentalism. The environmental justice movement, it can be argued, tends to subsume class struggle under race and gender struggles, and is far from embracing the socialist critique of capitalism (though it has that potential). At the same time the movement is primarily urban and local in its orientation, de-emphasizing natural ecosystems as opposed to the built environment, and giving relatively scant attention to the global (or planetary) ecological difficulties that have galvanized much of the environmental movement.

All of this means that Harvey, while allying himself with the environmental justice movement (correctly in my opinion), finds himself nonetheless confronted with the dilemma of what he sees as environmentalist hesitations before socialism, and consequently by his own socialist hesitations before environmentalism. In the remainder of this essay I propose to look at these two sets of hesitations as depicted in Harvey's book and their implications for a unified approach to socialist ecology.

For Harvey, the ecological movement is rife with ideas that sharply conflict with socialism. Most important is a pervasive Malthusianism,

²Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope* (New York: Verso, 1989).

³John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), pp. 137-42, and "The Age of Planetary Crisis," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 29, 4, Fall, 1997), pp. 135-38.

which he defines extremely broadly not only in terms of the importance given to the overpopulation concept, but also as encompassing any theories that adopt the concept of ecoscarcity or notions of natural limits (pp. 139-47). In fact, Harvey sees the triad of concepts of overpopulation, ecoscarcity and sustainability as primarily capitalistic in orientation, aimed at the preservation of the status quo (pp. 147-48). In addition, he questions what he sees as the main drift of the ecological movement for its rejection of a human-centered world view (or anthropocentrism); its open embrace of a Romantic outlook more likely to lead in a reactionary than a revolutionary direction (here he raises the issue of Nazi ecology); its mindless apocalypticism; its characteristic anti-urban ethos which privileges wilderness while failing to see that cities are ecosystems; its susceptibility to capitalistic projects of ecological modernization; and its abstract focus on ethics divorced from realistic conceptions of how exchange value has become the universal coin of capitalist society, mediating all relationships. At best, as in the environmental justice movement, the struggle takes the form of a militant particularism which has not (or not yet) embraced the universalism of socialism. For Harvey all of these characteristics of the green movement militate against a socialist politics, despite the surface critique of capitalist values, and constitute either hesitations before socialism or worse — a reactionary dynamic at work.

As noted above, Harvey's perception of such ecological hesitations before socialism seems to have had the effect of generating within his thinking certain socialist hesitations before ecology. Concepts of ecological crisis and ecological sustainability are for the most part rejected in his analysis. "It is materially impossible," he states (not entirely without reason), "for us to destroy the planet earth;" but from this he jumps to the conclusion that "the worst that we can do is engage in material transformations of our environment so as to make life less rather than more comfortable for our own species being, while recognizing that what we do also has ramifications (both positive and negative) for other living species (*italics added*)" (p. 194). Any notion of global ecological crisis that goes beyond this is, for Harvey, a form of apocalypticism, even if emanating from scientists themselves, and thus vulnerable to the arguments of anti-environmentalist critics like Julian Simon and Greg Easterbrook (p. 195). Highlighting some of the ways in which the concept of sustainability has been exploited of late to promote the sustainability of capitalist society (most dramatically in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit), he throws doubts on any affirmative use of the concept whatsoever within socialist discourse (pp. 148, 383).

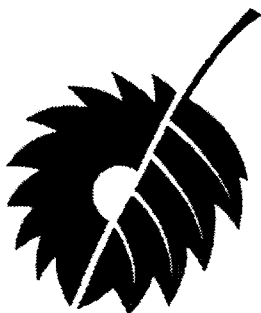
Harvey's socialist hesitations before ecology are most evident in his off-hand rejection of all current ecosocialist attempts to synthesize the Marxist and ecological critiques of capitalism. Malthusianism, he argues — I think correctly — has penetrated some versions of Marxism (p. 139).⁴ But Harvey's extremely broad definition of Malthusianism — encompassing not only those thinkers who stress overpopulation, but also those who refer in any way to ecological scarcity — relegates all theories, even ecosocialist ones, that take natural limits into account to the Malthusian camp. According to Harvey, ecological Marxists, in returning “to the ecoscarcity and natural limits argument as being in some sense more fundamental than Marx” are often guilty of “a sad capitulation to capitalistic arguments” (p. 147). Michael Perelman comes in for sharp criticism for examining some of Marx's own discussions of ecoscarcity and thereby suggesting, in Harvey's words, that Marx “was more of a Malthusian than he would have cared to admit” (p. 140). Other ecosocialists are criticized for allegedly attempting to open a second (ecological) route to socialism, other than the one emanating from class (p. 180). Ironically, Harvey ends up embracing the environmental justice movement because of its militant particularism and socialist (class) potential, while, at the same time, largely rejecting both ecology (understood as a more universal movement concerned with sustaining the biosphere and the various ecosystems within it) and ecosocialism.

My own view — though I have no space to develop it here — owes much to the same kind of dialectical perspective that Harvey so brilliantly evokes in Part I of his book. From a dialectical perspective, natural limits and sustainability are not simply Malthusian concepts. Marx made use of both concepts in constructing his critique of capitalist society and his vision of a society of associated producers. Indeed, Marx, as I have argued on a number of occasions, was the

⁴Harvey is right, in my view, to raise questions about neo-Malthusian Marxism, as in the case of Ted Benton's work. See Ted Benton, “Marxism and Natural Limits,” *New Left Review*, 178, November-December, 1989. But, ironically, Harvey ends up adopting Benton's contention that the concept of natural limits is a monopoly of the Malthusian tradition, anathema to Marx and Marxism. Hence, in rejecting neo-Malthusian Marxism, Harvey also rejects as “Malthusian” any theories that recognize the existence of natural limits, failing to see that such a critique would apply to Marx himself. For a full discussion of the issues related to neo-Malthusian Marxism see Paul Burkett, “A Critique of Neo-Malthusian Marxism: Benton's ‘Ecological Reconstruction’ of Marx,” forthcoming, *Historical Materialism*.

greatest proponent, among 19th century political economists, of sustainability or sustainable development — in the sense of the preservation, restoration and “improvement” of the earth for the sake of future generations (and in accordance with the nature-imposed “metabolic” relation between human beings and the earth).⁵ The modern concept of sustainability arose in the 19th century out of real processes and struggles. Today it is thrust upon us once again by the scale of the human transformation of the earth, and the dangers this poses for our own life support systems, and for the biosphere as we know it, as well as by the environmental inequities that increasingly arise as capitalist society tries in its own way to dispose of the problem.

From this point of view, there is no absolute contradiction between socialism and ecology, which ultimately depend on each other for their fulfillment. The chief barrier separating the two today, and preventing a sustainable relation to the earth, is none other than the capitalist economy itself. Hence, our goal should be a ruthless critique of everything existing, such that it becomes possible to bring together the essential elements of these movements and of their critiques of capitalism. Before this task at least we should have no hesitations. —
John B. Foster



⁵John Bellamy Foster, “The Crisis of the Earth,” *Organization & Environment*, 10, 3, September 1997, pp. 278-95 and “Marx and the Environment” in Colin Leys and Leo Panitch, ed., *The Socialist Register*, 1998 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).