

Current Directions in the U.S. Ecology Movement

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Ecological activism is an area still in search of a role in many societies around the world. While movements in countries as diverse as Brazil and Belgium race to discover more effective methods of meeting the serious environmental threats to our planet, corporate greed and a burgeoning world population set an ever-increasing pace. In industrially advanced nations, with their disproportionate consumption of global resources, the need for activists to organize effective networks for change could never be more urgent. Environmental concerns have gradually found their way into diverse areas of society as advocacy groups grow both numerically and in their ability to affect change.

From within the U.S. environmental movement have arisen a number of splinter groups whose aims are not simply to protect or conserve the environment, but also to bring about fundamental changes in the way societies are organized. In this sense, environmentalism in Japan may be regarded as an exception. Apart from some of the early coop movements with their roots in student struggles of the 1960's, there appears to be comparatively little activity in politically-based ecological action of the type found in some other societies. While Japanese groups directly involved with environmental issues have gained an awareness that direct citizen action can be effective in forcing change in government policy and in wresting control of their lives from corporate control, few appear to have any particular political or ideological framework guiding their activities. As some critics have claimed, the movement seems to lack a true alternative vision of society on which to base its activities.

Japanese environmentalists often take note of activities abroad and are frequently encouraged by the successes of foreign groups in opposing such dangers as river 'development' projects, the proliferation of nuclear power and weapons, or destructive logging practices. Seen from Japan, movements in other countries may give the impression of being united in their tactics and goals as they work to achieve ends similar at first glance to those of their counterparts in Japan. But simply judging the strength or resources of movements in other nations without noting the ideological diversity among what are collectively called 'foreign environmentalists' can be misleading. Different groups work towards common goals on certain issues while remaining totally at odds on others. Ultimate aims often vary too, with a variety of groups collaborating on certain projects through which each hopes to attain their respective goals.

With their amoebae-like growth and division and inevitable overlapping of theoretical foundations and practical tactics, characterizing the variety of ecological groupings in countries like the United States is not a simple task. What follows is a rough outline of some of the principal currents in the U.S. ecology movement today.

"Garden vs. Wilderness" View

A major division among U.S. ecologists concerns the role humans ultimately play in the environment and evolution. Whether humans can be regarded in some sense as the 'directors' of planetary evolution and therefore assume a caretaker (albeit dominant) role, or whether they are to be viewed essentially on the same plane as other life forms is a question hotly debated within the movement.

Proponents of the 'Earth as Garden' view consider it the obligation of humanity to carefully direct evolution, improving, in a sense, upon the design nature has provided. A certain amount of environmental destruction is warranted under such assumptions as when humans reinforce river banks to prevent flooding or find new habitats for animals to allow for human settlement. Humans are equally a part of the environment and as its self-appointed maintenance engineers need to ensure their own well being as they attempt to preserve the environment. Many 'mainstream' environmental groups such as the *Audobon Society* and the *Environmental Defense Fund* fall into this category

In contrast to this clearly anthropocentric view are adherents of what the Norwegian ecologist, Arne Naess, has referred to as 'deep ecology'. Deep ecologists argue that all living organisms have an inherent right to exist and fulfill their own evolutionary potential. Humans, insofar as they are only one of a multitude of planetary life forms, can only justify environmental destruction to the extent that their most basic functional needs are met. In order to allow for the unfettered evolution of diverse life forms, deep ecologists insist on maintaining large areas of wilderness off limits to human development and to allow natural evolutionary processes to take their course—even, if necessary, at the expense of human life. The best known advocates of deep ecology in the U.S. are members of the group *Earth First!* with its flamboyant leader Dave Foreman. *Earth First!* has been criticized by many mainstream environmental groups for employing such shock tactics as driving steel spikes into trees marked for logging, sabotaging bulldozers and logging vehicles, or frequently destroying excavation sites.

Reform vs. Revolution

Another dichotomizing line may be drawn between different sub-groups based on tactical considerations involving the degree to which change can (or should) be effected from within current sociopolitical structures. 'Creating the new from within the shell of the old' is a slogan used by advocates of reform environmentalism who propose to build environmentally sound societies upon existing frameworks through such activities as 'green consumerism' and the formation of political action groups. Prominent among reform environmental groups are 'Big Ten' organizations like the *Sierra Club* or the *National Wildlife Federation* whose stated goals are to infiltrate Washington political circles in hopes of influencing environmental legislation. Political compromise, as they put it, is an essential cost of a negotiation process that will eventually result in stricter regulations on destructive development and irresponsible corporate behavior.

Opposed to the idea that present societies possess the potential for self-reform, other groups press for strictly independent, extra-parliamentary struggles. No manner of reform, they claim, can ecologically transform a society which has as its stated dynamic the accumulation of capital and which professes an almost fatalistic belief in growth, whether it be of the unlimited, or as is the current fashion, "sustainable" sort. Members of groups in this category believe, along with holistic economist E.F. Schumacher, that the myopic focus of modern economics on monetary value as the sole measure of wealth does not allow effective change from within the system. Revolutionary environmentalists frequently support the 'direct action' tactics of groups like *Earth First!* or *Greenpeace*.

The Ecological Spectrum

Within these larger boundaries can be found a wide variety of environmental groupings which, while falling into one or another of the above-mentioned categories, are further distinguishable by the emphasis they place on certain political or social issues. Among the major groupings are the following:

Eco-capitalists. Of the many organizations which deal with environmental issues, this grouping has received both the greatest funding and also the greatest opprobrium from ecologists. Some suggest that, because of their dismal record of failure, corruption and complacency, they do not merit the title of environmentalists at all. Many corporate-sponsored research institutes and think tanks fall into this category. Often labeled as fronts for industry, groups with such environmentally sounding names as the *Sustainable Energy Council* or the *Wetlands Commission* spend millions of dollars each year on public relations work ostensibly designed to inform the public about environmental problems. More

often than not, the information disseminated by these organizations seeks to deflect public worries about environmental hazards caused by the very corporations which provide their grants. General information concerning their activities appears in glossy pamphlets printed on recycled paper or on professionally-produced television advertisements.

Eco-merchants. Groups within this category, while usually of a more independent and sincere nature than eco-capitalists, still support the use of market forces to protect or transform the environment. Organizations such as *Cultural Survival* argue for the 'productive use' of the rain forest in order to rescue it from transnational logging interests and appeal to concerned citizens in developed countries by marketing their products under 'green' labels. The logic behind such practices, however well motivated, involves a clear ultimatum for native peoples either to accept the capitalist paradigm or to face destruction. A further more immediate danger, claim critics, rests on the volatility of international commodity prices which rise or fall independent of any inherent environmental value. And while eco-merchandising has proved effective in helping to stave off minor corporate predators, ordinary market forces continue to take their toll and all but the most aggressive eco-businesses survive.

Eco-conservatives. This grouping, according to Japan-based environmentalist Richard Evannoff, lays claim to the heritage of traditional conservative 'American' values of self-reliance and non-interference by the government. People who consider themselves conservatives in the classic sense resent the destruction of the natural environment both because it infringes on their personal freedom to benefit from the land as they choose and because they resent the changing values of modern society which have accompanied modern development. Included in this category are many conservationists and naturalists as well as some elements of the deep ecology movement who oppose social programs on the basis that they encourage human displacement of other life forms. Certain members of this group have been criticized for advocating a form of neo-Malthusianism in which various human communities—typically minorities or impoverished third world citizens—are simply considered expendable.

Eco-feminists. Founded on centuries of male-dominated hierarchy, modern societies, according to advocates of this philosophy, have lost sight of their place in the natural environment. Eco-feminists claim that the nurturing spirit required to see humanity in its proper perspective comes more naturally to women than to men and it is only by overcoming those typically 'male' attitudes of domination and violence toward women that current patterns of environmental destruction can be

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changed. Others within the same current, suggest that women are no more inherently in tune with nature than men. What are usually referred to as dominant 'male' attitudes can be assumed by either men or women and are the result of traditional power relationships. The dominance of men over women, so apparent in most societies around the world, is simply a reflection of the larger human tendency towards hierarchical power structures. The social ecologist, Janet Beihl, among others, argues against hierarchy and domination in all of its manifestations.

Eco-socialists. The principle contention of this grouping is that capitalism, with its inexorable drive towards growth and the accumulation of capital resources is quite simply the logical contradiction of environmentalism. Basing its central tenets on the Marxist critique of capital, this grouping tends to emphasize the disproportionate effects of environmental destruction on members of the poor working class. Despite the minor successes of eco-merchants in safeguarding certain areas from destructive logging or eco-capitalist management of trade to discourage the use of lead in gasoline, eco-socialists maintain a pessimistic attitude concerning the ultimate fate of the earth under the rule of capital. Although critics point to the dismal environmental record of former Soviet bloc countries such as Poland—with rivers so polluted that even industries cannot use them—socialists generally dismiss such criticism as familiar red scare tactics and deny all but the most basic resemblance to these former communist regimes. They contend that given the gravity of the environmental crisis today, strict centrally-organized policies are necessary to avert an unprecedented ecological disaster.

Eco-anarchists. Largely in response to the lack of options offered by either capitalists or socialists, this grouping appeals to ecologists who oppose the heavy hand of both corporations and governments. With roots in the theories of such 19th century philosophers as Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin, eco-anarchists propose a society organized loosely around federations of local worker-controlled cooperatives. Citizen-controlled workplaces and communities, they argue, would of necessity be more sensitive to environmental concerns than distant boards of directors residing in far-away cities. As worker-controlled industry slowly gains popularity in the United States, proposals for federations similar to the Mondragon cooperative region of northern Spain have received increasing support. Organizations such as the *Industrial Cooperative Association* in Massachusetts and *Worker Owned Network* in Ohio provide technical and managerial advice to newly formed worker-controlled cooperatives. A number of writers and activists like Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel have outlined environmentally-integrated, radically-democratic networks of citizens which resemble in many respects the federalist views of the influential French anarchist, Pierre Joseph Proudhon. Representative

of eco-anarchism are such writers as Murray Bookchin and Daniel Chodorkoff of the Vermont-based Institute of Social Ecology.

Unity in Diversity

Although ideological differences can discourage effective coalitions and result in gains for the many opponents of the environmental movement, a number of groups in the United States and elsewhere, while retaining their distinct ideologies, are also beginning to explore common goals and how they can be achieved. Despite the apparent diversity among these different sub-groups, there are numerous areas in which concerns overlap or interlock leading some analysts to characterize the movement as "united in diversity". The U.S. Green Party is perhaps the best evidence for such a claim as it attempts to bring elements in many of the above-mentioned groups together to work for social and political change.

Possibly the most vital issue around which the Greens hope to unite their allies concerns the problem of economic growth. Greens pose the essential question of whether or not unlimited growth—"sustainable" or otherwise—is feasible in a world of finite natural resources. The answer, they suggest, is an unequivocal "No." Brian Tokar of the U.S. Greens, in an article for *Z magazine* speaks for a majority of the more radical environmentalists when he criticizes the current U.S. government for its doctrine that "environmental protection needs to be made consistent with economic growth". The American vice-president Gore, himself a self-proclaimed environmentalist and the author of a best selling book on the subject, implores ecologists to accept his thesis that a growing corporate-controlled, world economy is fully compatible with larger environmental goals.

Except for the staunchest supporters of a radical, independent ecology movement, many U.S. environmentalists appear to have accepted the entreaties of the Clinton/Gore government. Several formerly anti-collaborationist groups, now seem to work comfortably with government agencies toward such limited goals as conserving what little remains of U.S. wilderness, assuring that minimal restrictions will be placed on additives to food, or that air and water quality deteriorates at a somewhat slower pace. Some believe that if this process of de-politicizing the movement continues and efforts to harness the more adversarial groups proceed unhindered, many of the distinctions in the environmental movement noted in this paper may begin to dissolve as ecologists work more on 'stopgap' measures and less towards fundamentally uncompromisable goals. The increasing impoverishment and societal displacement caused in large part by corporate mismanagement of the natural environment may then shift the burden of environmental activism increasingly onto the shoulders of the dispossessed

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who, as Tokar states, have "no place in the Brave New 'Green' World of corporate environmentalism.

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