

Radical or Reactionary Tomatoes?

Organizing against the Toxic Legacy of Capital's Environmentalism

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These days if you eat out in one of Chicago's award-winning restaurants or bars (pandemic restrictions at the time of writing permitting), the chances are that some of the vegetables on your plate will have been grown on one of the city's rooftop "city farms" (DiNardo 2019). Live in the right apartment block in the right neighborhood and you can benefit without even having to leave your home: for a weekly subscription, roof-top grown fruits and vegetables will be delivered to your door. Chicago is not unique: across North America, rooftop farms and "green roofs" are blooming. According to Toronto-based industry association Green Roofs for Healthy Cities, the number of green roofs in North America has increased by 15 per cent in the last seven years (Green Roofs 2019). Cities such as New York, Seattle, Toronto, San Francisco, and Washington DC have all introduced new building regulations to encourage greater use of rooftops to grow food or gardens (Green Roofs 2019). Outside of North America, Córdoba in Argentina now requires all rooftops — new or existing — of more than 1,300 square feet to be turned into green roofs (DiNardo 2019); Dubai is developing 12,000 hectares of rooftop horticultural projects (Eye of Riyadh 2017); more than 10 per cent of houses in Germany (said to be the world leader in green roof technologies) have green roofs (Li and Yeung 2014); and Singapore is even installing green roofs on buses (Hardman and Davies 2019).

The potential environmental benefits are considerable. In addition to increasing the space for food production, green roofs can reduce air-conditioning use in a building by as much as 75 per cent and save energy more widely through reducing the tendency of cities to create "heat islands" (Livingroofs undated); mitigate floods by retaining rainwater (Hardman and Davies 2020); and increase urban biodiversity. Small wonder that many now see them as integral to the greening of future cities.

But green roofs are not just roofs used to grow vegetation: Who owns them; how they are financed; who labors on them and under what conditions; who gets to eat what is produced on them and on what terms; who decides how they are managed and for whom; all combine to set in train widely differing social, economic, political, and environmental trajectories. As Mexican social activist Gustavo Esteva remarks: "Some rooftop tomatoes are reactionary but others are radical" (Esteva 2013). They are reactionary when, for example, they are genetically-engineered — the gene splicers are already at work to create tomatoes "bunched like grapes" that are better suited to cramped urban spaces than traditional varieties (Unrein 2019) — and grown by labor employed by venture capital-backed entrepreneurs for sale at a profit to exclusive restaurants can only serve to entrench the exploitative dynamics of capital accumulation that despoil the environment in the first place. They are radical when, say, cultivated through collective endeavor for use rather than profit, prepared and eaten communally, and bearing the potential to weave relationships of comradeship, trust and mutuality that are the lifeblood of social formations where survival is not the "isolated right of the individual" (Illich 1983) but the collective goal of common behavior.

On the face of it, the Kurdish movement's commitment to democratic confederalism (Öcalan 2017) — with its embrace of inclusive, participatory decision-making practices; its rejection of patriarchy; its opposition to capitalist forms of production and exchange; and its recognition of "ecology" as a pillar of its politics — provides promising ground for radicalizing not just tomatoes but forests, rivers, streams, lakes, mountains, fields, trading arrangements, highways, power plants, factories, homes, offices, and the livelihoods they support.

In part, that radicalizing promise rests on the clear rejection of what the anarchist writer and activist Murray Bookchin (whose influence on the Kurdish movement's thinking has been substantial) called "the shopworn Earth Day approach to engineering nature so that we can ravage the Earth with minimal effect on ourselves" (Bookchin 1987) — the rejection of those who "are simply trying to make a rotten society work by dressing it in green leaves and colourful flowers while ignoring the deep-seated roots of our ecological problems" (Bookchin 1987). In part, it rests on the recognition that the ecological movement is not automatically a force for social justice just because it is against environmental despoilation. Far from it: deeply reactionary strands of thinking and doing permeate environmentalism, from the neo-Malthusianism of "deep ecology" (a prime butt of Bookchin's criticisms) to those who employ "nature" to "justify" sexist and racist social orders or who seek to absolve the perpetrators of destruction by obscuring its deep roots in colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy (Lohmann 2020).

Trapped by Language – Whose "Environment"?

Such reactionary strands of environmental thought have left an inheritance of categories, tools, and concepts that it would be dangerous for any would-be cultivators of radical tomatoes/forests/waste disposal systems/ roads/irrigation systems or other sinews of society to take at face value.

Just as women — who have no option but to use languages (such as contemporary English) that are replete with patriarchal assumptions — are often left with no vocabulary to express what is essential for them to express (Spender 1980), so too those who seek to radicalize ecology are sometimes trapped by the received language of Capital's environmentalism. The need to deconstruct, decolonize and rework the concepts that are currently used to "manage" the environment is thus urgent. One way forward may be to learn from steps that feminists have taken — the "jineoloji" program of the Kurdish women's movement is an example (Briy and Anonymous 2019) — to explore and analyze the historical roots of patriarchy in order better to subvert the political and economic interests that continue insidiously to shape patriarchy today.

The challenge is huge. Even a simple word like “environment,” which is hard to avoid in any discussions on ecological issues, comes equipped with in-built biases and assumptions that occlude or suppress perspectives that do not reflect mainstream economic and political interests – and in doing so favor outcomes that benefit the dominant social order. Environmental impact assessments, for example, start from the premise that the “environment” is a given: it is simply what is around us. But far from being a self-evident, universal and unproblematic category, the “environment” and the “fields”, “forests”, “rivers”, “streams” and “hills” that, Meccano-like, are taken to be its equally self-evident, universal and unproblematic components, are always fiercely contested political spaces.

Take forests. For those who rely directly on them for their livelihoods, the trees and undergrowth, mosses, birds, bees, and flowers represent secure water supplies, fodder for animals, housing materials, medicines for friends and family, a home for local deities and shelter from army patrols, tax collectors or (for playful children) adults (Hildyard et al. 2001). By contrast, for many middle-ranking forest department officials, “forests” are defined instead by the information that passes across their desks: the latest scientific paper on planting regimes; budgets for planting; tenders for logging; catalogues advertizing new logging equipment or the latest jeep; curriculum vitae; training schemes and opportunities for promotion. For logging company accountants, forests may be no more than board feet of timber; for many pharmaceutical researchers, they are pools of “biodiversity” from which to extract patented drugs; whilst for harried executives in polluting industries, they have become “sinks” to be created (or preserved) to offset carbon dioxide emissions (Hildyard et al. 1997).

Degradation of forests therefore has radically different meanings for different groups of people because of differing consequences – inevitably giving rise to different approaches to tackling environmental degradation. For many in government, business and international organizations, such degradation – together with the protests it provokes – tends to be viewed as a threat to their political and economic interests. For them, the environment is not what is around their homes but what is around their economies (Hildyard et al. 1995).

The preferred response of many planners, politicians, development practitioners, civil servants, and heads of industry lies in increasingly global forms of management that are instrumental and (inevitably) top-down. The world is split up into fixed ends and available means. Then, in a process that is taken to be synonymous with rationality, the means are matched to the ends. In doing so, nearly everyone and everything is transformed into tools whose effectiveness in “helping us get from A to B” is the prerogative of the managers themselves to decide and measure. Acting on “objective data”, managers plan, mobilize and “clear space for action.” Others, whose lack of skills and autonomous ends are either assumed or enforced, are “empowered” only in so far as they can be used instrumentally to carry out the managers’ designs. People become “obstacles” to be removed or cajoled in “collaboration”; the physical landscape a terrain to be reordered, zoned and parceled up according to some preconceived Master Plan (Hildyard et al. 1997). By contrast, for grassroots groups who rely on the forests for their livelihoods, the debate is often not only over such technical questions as how to conserve soil or what species of tree to plant, but also over how to create or defend open, democratic community institutions that ensure people’s control over their own lives. One central demand made by group after group is for a great deal of authority to be vested in the community – not in the state, local government, the market, or the local landlord, but in those who rely on the local commons for their livelihood. For these groups, the

struggle is for more than the mere recognition of rights over the physical commons: critically, it is also a struggle to restore or to defend the checks and balances that limit power within the local community (Hildyard et al. 1997).

Which of these differing interests gets heard and implemented is an outcome of their relative organizing power, itself a reflection of their economic and political position within society, of racism and gender discrimination, and of other inequalities. Those interests and inequalities – and their social, economic, and ecological justice dynamics – should be at the very heart of impact assessments: only then can the drivers of destruction be understood and addressed. Instead, they are currently largely hidden, not just by reactionary language but also by techniques, such as cost benefit analysis (Lohmann 1997; O’Neill 1993) that are deliberately designed to truncate or exclude open-ended democratic discussion of values, power relations, and the like. Forces of destruction get a free pass. Business-as-usual ecology with all its reactionary tomatoes rolls on largely unscathed.

Climatology: Don’t ask, don’t act

“Climate” offers another example. As my Corner House colleague Larry Lohmann (2020) has argued, climate movements have inherited a conception of climate science that rules off-limits most of what is most important to understanding and addressing damaging climate change. As Lohmann records:

“In 2014, Sir John Houghton, founding member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, gave an interview explaining that UN climatologists were not permitted to mention the carbon locked up in fossil fuels in their analysis of climate change, but only carbon that had become more mobile in the form of CO₂. To follow what happens when carbon atoms cross one of the internal borders of the earth’s geophysical system into the atmosphere is ‘science’, Houghton said. But to analyze their movements toward that border ‘is not a science question’” (Lohmann 2020a).

In other words, climatology is not allowed to ask why the climate is changing. It cannot delve into “the politics and history of extraction, enclosure, labour exploitation, colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy and violation of nature’s rights” (Lohmann 2020b) – and consequently leaves the structural drivers of climate chaos unexamined, untouched and largely untouchable.

Confined within this limited framework, climatology views the problem of climate change merely as a problem of molecules that are in the wrong place. The result, argues Lohmann, is that the climate crisis is treated “in more or less the same way that the far right treats the immigration crisis” (Lohmann 2020a): control the movement of the wayward molecules by turning them away at the border, locking them up (through underground carbon capture and storage schemes or “sequestering” carbon in trees) or discouraging their migration (through carbon taxes to reduce carbon dioxide emissions or Green New Deals to spread new sources of electricity generation that do not emit carbon dioxide).

But attempting to control carbon dioxide molecules without addressing “historically-rooted patterns of capital accumulation,

white supremacy, unrelenting imperialism and ruthless patriarchy" (Lohmann 2020a) has simply served to keep the whole destructive juggernaut rolling (Hildyard 2016). Two decades of "policing migrant carbon atoms" has delivered rising, not falling, carbon emissions (Redd Monitor 2019, 2020), threatening to fry all of us. For capital, however, the strategy is a bonanza. Mark Carney, the UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and former Governor of the Bank of England, has described the "net zero" carbon economy as "the greatest commercial opportunity of our time" (Green Horizon Summit 2020). Likewise, mining companies are licking their lips. Jon Samuel, Group Head of Responsible Business Partnerships at the mining multinational Anglo American, reports: "The transition to green economy, particularly low-carbon energy, is going to be one of the biggest boosts for the mining sector in generations. . . It's a very big opportunity for us" (Gowling WLG 2020).

While "zero carbon" promises profits for capital, however, it has unleashed new inequalities, new despoilations and new injustices for the already oppressed. Witness the African children mining cobalt for distinctly reactionary – and racist – electric car batteries (Sanderson 2019); or the hectares of land in the global south being grabbed by multinationals to grow equally racist and reactionary biofuels for European and North American motorists (Grain 2013); or the plans to cover swathes of North Africa with imperialist and reactionary solar panels to provide European companies with electricity to turn gas into "clean" hydrogen (Corporate Europe Observatory et al. 2020).

The Revolutionary Promise of Plurality

A further obstacle that the intended radicalism in Democratic Confederalism's ecology has inherited is the Cartesian dualism that sets Man (yes, "Man") against Nature, an inheritance whose bloodline and trajectory is predictably as steeped in racism, patriarchy, and the demands of capital accumulation as climatology and mainstream environmentalism (Merchant 1980). Even though decades of struggle by environmental justice movements have toned down the talk of Man's "dominance over Nature" in favor of a rhetoric of "working with Nature," the Man-Nature dualism continues to thrive in self-serving assumptions that Nature is "there to serve" Man; in Neo-Malthusian views that ascribe poverty, malnutrition, and hunger to an inherent clash between Man, on the one hand, and the limits set by Nature on the other (even though the "limits" that matter are generally socially constructed) (Haila 2000); and in the thinking behind efforts to specify precise, enforceable "ecological boundaries" (Rockström et al. 2009) within which humans must live if large-scale ecological damage is to be avoided – a program that (although commendable for taking ecological destruction seriously) threatens to license a profoundly undemocratic response to the ecological crisis facing humanity by legitimizing the policing of both Man (who? Laborers and poorer people? Or capital and the 1%?) and Nature (whose "Nature"? by an unelected elite of ecological managers).

Decolonizing and dismantling the Man-Nature dualism is central to the Kurdish movement's approach to ecology. Indeed, it insists that respect for plurality (if it is to mean anything) must extend beyond the human realm to embrace the multiplicity of non-human forms of life on which all life depends for its collective survival (Hunt 2017). To pay more than lip-service to that recognition – to actualize it through practice – would indeed be transformational (Hildyard 2018): but the challenges of doing so are immense.

The gravitational pull of centuries of Cartesian thought and capitalist practice – from which mainstream environmentalism does not seek to break free – is relentlessly anthropocentric. To reject that anthropocentrism is, for many, to enter unfamiliar territory. If the

environment is not to be viewed simply as "what is around us" (the "us" being undifferentiated humans), how else might it be conceived? How can non-humans be accorded meaningful representation in discussions about collective survival? Is "Nature" to be represented through "experts"? Or through daily actions that develop a new conversation with the natural world? Does the very idea of a "Nature" stand in the way of these conversations? Or is "Nature" a concept which "will have to wither away in an 'ecological' state of human society" (Morton 2007, 1), not least because absolutist Nature-Human boundaries are rendered meaningless once the myriad interactions between humans and non-humans are contextualized (Haila 2000) and recognition is given to the ways in which these interactions co-produce the world in which we all live.

These are not questions that can be left to the experts. They are intensely political and demand wide public debate. They invite activists for social and environmental justice to broaden our view of what constitutes the political and to take seriously not only the power relations among humans but also the power relations between humans and non-humans; and to be relentless in bringing this expanded notion of the political into our practice and our theorizing. How might our notions of "justice" be changed if we treat the oppression of non-humans as seriously as the oppression of humans? What new inequalities might we become aware of? How would that change our practices and concepts of what constitutes solidarity?

To ask such questions is inevitably to open up still further areas of inquiry: How might our view of "the collective right of all to survival" change if we acknowledged the agency of non-humans and their role in the co-production of nature? How might that shift our view of what constitutes labor? How might greater attention to the unpaid labor of non-humans assist our understanding of how value is created for capital? How might this inform our critiques of contemporary capitalism, particularly as it moves further to enclose the natural world through extracting new forms of rent from environmental services? And would an expanded notion of labor that took account of non-human labor change how we view class (in the same way, perhaps, as the recognition of the unpaid work of women in social reproduction has expanded our notion of labor beyond factory labor)?

New Alliances – But with Whom?

Decolonizing environmentalism, climatology, the Nature-Human divide and the many other inherited concepts of capital's greenery will not be easy, not least because the concepts are so deeply entrenched: even in this short paper, I am aware how often I have myself lapsed into mainstream thinking even whilst trying to question and dismantle it.

But three ways forward suggest themselves.

One is to recognize that "environment", "climate", the "nature-human divide" and "ecology" itself are all political processes in the making: the issue is how activists organize around them and the political choices they make (and with whom) when doing so. Growing radical tomatoes requires more than finding a new word for "environment" or "climate" or redefining these terms in the abstract: it requires building alliances capable of reshaping the practice of "environment" and "climate" through new ways of doing and thinking. The allies that are most likely to assist in this are those whose activism is rooted in the everyday struggles of people the world over to understand their oppression in all its various historical and contemporary manifestations – and who seek to challenge such oppression through defending and experimenting with ways of living rooted in

commons-focused resistance to capital accumulation, patriarchy, imperialism and racism (Hildyard 2016). It is here – within what Raúl Zibechi termed “societies in motion” (Zibechi 2010, 76) – that the most promising vectors for transformative change will be found (Caffentzis 2009; Holloway 2010). The Kurdish movement’s practical experimentation in democratic confederalism offers one vibrant example. Others are to be found in Latin America where the resistance of social movements to extractivism and other ecological injustices has spawned a lively debate over the “rights of nature”, now enshrined in at least one national constitution. Fruitful alliances are also likely to be found with social movements whose experience of oppression has led them to question the “whiteness” of mainstream climatology (Lohmann 2020).

A second way forward would be to recognize that lasting, politically effective alliances are unlikely to flourish where activists insist that “their” causes must take precedence over those of others or attempt to rush the slow processes of relationshipbuilding that generate the trust and mutual understanding that make for effective solidarity and co-operation. It is through such patient, inclusive relationship building that people come to see something of their own struggle in someone else’s, and vice versa; where they come to identify with others who may have quite different interests and to whom they may previously have been indifferent or even opposed; and where they are drawn together not so much because they come from or are “embedded in absolute sameness”, but because they come to realize that their life courses are being “determined by ultimately similar processes and outcomes” (Palmer 2014, 49). A social justice that is rooted in and shaped by such processes of discovery demands a practice and approach to politics that is very different from the approach adopted, either through inclination or bureaucratic imperative, by many professionalized non-governmental organizations. This is not an activism that rejects reports or demonstrations or lobbying; but it is an activism that emphasizes mutual learning and unlearning, an understanding of each other’s histories and political context, the building of relationships of care, and respectful dialogue; and it places these processes over and above short-term, in-and-out, often opportunistic, priorities of ‘campaigns’. Above all, it is activism that emphasizes patience, listening, solidarity and comradeship as the basis for collective action in defense of commons; and, beyond that, as seedbeds for cultivating the “disciplined, self-denying, careful, tasteful friendships” that renegade priest and social activist Ivan Illich (1996) identified as the “supreme flower of politics” and the very basis of community. As Illich (1996) remarks, a society will only be “as good as the political result of [its] friendships”; those founded on mutuality and a shared commitment to collective survival – on commoning – will produce a very different society from those based on competition, accumulation and “capital-ing” (Lohmann 2015), one that is better equipped to resist the temptations of capital and its enclosing web of depredations (Esteva 2014).

A third recognition that offers a solid base for moving forward is that excavating the history and politics of environmentalism – its class roots, its role in legitimizing discrimination and expropriation, the interests that have benefited and the resistances that have been triggered in response – is not a luxury that activists can set to one side. It is essential to alliance-building and to liberating activists from the vocabularies and practices that limit our ability to reconceptualize our relationships with the natural world. To decline the invitation to probe into histories of patriarchy, racism, and capital accumulation, and to decline to accord equal respect to those whose ecology is rooted in such analysis (and even some would-be radical climate activists within Extinction Rebellion are guilty of this (Lohmann 2020a)) is to send the wrong message. It is to signal that the oppressions that are

part and parcel of the daily lives of millions are somehow “secondary” or “irrelevant” to “saving the environment”. To take such a course is fatally to misunderstand the root causes of the crisis, and also leads to an organizational dead end by cutting campaigners off from the very movements that are most active in seeking to move society beyond what the social philosopher André Gorz (1968,7) called “reformist reforms” toward system-busting “non-reformist reforms”. In doing so, it does not bring change closer, but makes it more distant.

The traps laid by the toxic inheritance of capital’s environmentalism are clear. Circumventing them is the challenge. The movement has already pioneered new organizational practices that have taken seriously the struggle of women against the oppressions of patriarchy. Similar radical experimentation will surely be needed to organize against the many oppressions of capital’s environmentalism. It is a road that will be fraught with conflict and disappointment: but, if the revolutionary promise of democratic confederalism’s ecology is to be realized, it is a road that cannot be avoided.

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Peace in Kurdistan is involved in a collaborative project in which, together, we are trying to envisage what self-determination can and must mean in the 21st century. We are interested in making connections between struggles for self-determination around the globe. We take our inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's re-articulation of self-determination. Öcalan has emphasised that "the propagation of grass roots democracy is elementary." We encourage people to send relevant original articles for inclusion in this new series.

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