

BOOK REVIEW

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF UTOPIA: ESSAYS ON SOCIAL ECOLOGY

(Chodorkoff, Dan. 2014. New Compass Press. Norway. Pp.185)

and

LOISAIDA: A NOVEL

(Chodorkoff, Dan. 2011. Fomite. Burlington. Vermont)

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The first and second books are academic and fictional introductions respectively to 'social ecology' as the means of achieving ecological, harmonious and peaceful world. The second book is better than the first book in that a fictional treatment affecting feelings could potentially reach a broader audience than that reached by a typical academic book. The first one is better than the second one in that it gives conceptual clarity and factual definitiveness to our understanding. Both complement each other. I am very happy to have come across these writings that go a long way in getting out of the limitations of mainstream economics.

Social ecology, not yet much familiar to the Indian students of social sciences, has basically emerged out of anarchist conceptualization and activism in North America and America Latina. Anarchist thinkers such as Murray Bookchin, and anthropologists cum anarchist activists such as Dan Chodorkoff and Eduardo Gudynas are some leading resource persons in this regard. Their work on this is not easily available for reading in India, but needs to be recognized as a radical contribution to political economy and certainly should be internalized by those seeking alternative development strategies and practices. There is a thorough

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grassroots relook at the meaning of development and community development, which the economics students can obtain from the first book.

The two books under review deal with social ecology as a complex, interdisciplinary, utopian and well-grounded subject that draws on studies in philosophy, prefigurative politics, anthropology, history, biology, alternative technology and ecology and presents a framework for analyzing people's relationship to nature and to other people, and advocates a reconstructive perspective to reharmonize people and the rest of nature. Anthropology as an orientation toward a holistic view of culture with insights into the process of cultural change, and as a methodology based on participant observation, is the most important component of social ecology. When its ethnography is combined with storytelling or narrative form of writing, we get a powerful perspective for describing and analyzing a community as is evident in the second book.

It is not easy to say what is social ecology. We can go down from its abstract statements to concrete statements. It is an approach to society that embraces an ecological, reconstructive and communitarian view on society. It seeks to reconstruct and transform current outlooks on both social issues and environmental factors while promoting direct democracy. It is an attempt to do away with scarcity and hierarchy in the economy in favour of a world in which human communities work together in harmony with nature and thereby accept and promote diversity as well as creativity and freedom. It rejects the idea that man must control nature as it is tantamount to espousing an authoritarian mentality which is the root of our society's structure, and this is a root cause of environmental problems. Instead, it propounds that rather than being looked on as a hierarchy, life and the environment should be looked on as a complex system in which all lifeforms are interrelated and of equal importance to a healthy and sustainable environment. We have to transform our prevailing mentality of domination into one of complementarity, one that sees our role in the natural world as creative, supportive, and deeply appreciative of the needs of nonhuman life.

The most powerful idea is that ecological problems are inevitably the results of social dysfunctions in human society. Unless social issues like industrial expansion, class structure designating certain sections of humanity as 'inferior' and distorted views of what constitutes 'progress' are addressed, we will fall into the superficial understanding of the environmentalists singling out particular problems like overpopulation and deforestation. Without establishing a more egalitarian social system that is driven by equality and cooperation, and not by individual profits, and without there being collective action and equal concern for all aspects of life, the environmental cause will not be realized.

Environmentalists usually identify the primary ecological problem as being the preservation of wildlife or wilderness. In the process, ecological problems are separated from social problems. The argument of social ecology is that unless we examine the way human beings deal with each other through hierarchical mentality and class relationships, whereby we pinpoint trade for profit, industrial expansion and the identification of progress with corporate self-interest as the root causes of environmental crisis, we will only tend to focus on the symptoms of a grim social pathology rather than on the pathology itself, and our efforts will be directed only toward limited goals whose attainment is more cosmetic than curative. The obsession with free markets is dangerous. Market is a blind social mechanism and it turns soil into sand, covers fertile land with concrete, poisons air and water, and produces sweeping climatic and atmospheric changes. The various forms of domination from capitalistic economic growth, gender oppressions, ethnic domination, corporate-state-bureaucratic interests and the like must be confronted by collective action and by major social movements that challenge the social sources of the ecological crisis. Or else, if we go by the superficial environmentalists, we will only argue for changes in personalistic forms of consumption and investment that often go under the rubric of "green capitalism", and the present highly cooptative society is only too eager to find new means of commercial aggrandizement and to add ecological verbiage to its advertising and customer relations efforts.

Social ecology understands nature as natural history, the sum total of evolution, and makes a distinction between First Nature, or nature that evolved independent of human intervention, and Second Nature which has been affected by people and their actions. While second nature is understood to contain first nature, it is also seen as having distinct characteristics not shared by the rest of nature. It is this aspect of humanity, our ability to alter the environment we inhabit in unprecedented ways, which lies at the root of both our destructive tendencies (there is no such thing as an environmental problem caused by first nature, the root of all environmental destruction rests with human society, and further, our attempts to dominate nature, grow out of the domination of some people by other people) and our potential for creativity and restoration. Social ecology opposes hierarchy and domination in all of its forms. It has a reconstructive dimension that seeks to facilitate the creation of a non-hierarchical, decentralized, directly democratic, communal society to provide a basis for reharmonizing our relationship to the rest of nature, a reconciliation of first nature and second nature into a “free nature” so that humanity can realize the potential to become “nature rendered self-conscious”! This sounds too grandiose a conceptualization to grasp at one go. On a practical level, it means that social ecologists engage in protest, political action, the creation of alternative institutions, and community development, largely around the development of ecologically sound forms of energy and food production. It is an oppositional, reconstructive, and political form of ecological action rooted in a non-Stalinist left tradition that draws on elements of both Marxism and Anarchism.

Social ecology is based on the 'principle of hope', and a utopian sensibility which suggests that a new world is not only possible, but that it is necessary. Our current institutions and relationships are based on greed, competition, aggression and domination as expressions of 'human nature'. Social ecology propels us to go beyond this and look for a broader understanding of 'human potential' which is a continuum in that while it undeniably encompasses greed, competition, aggression and domination, it also contains the possibilities of care, cooperation, nurturance, and unity in diversity. The point is that our current assumptions about our 'nature' are an

expression of only one set of the wide range of possibilities open to us as a species. In this sense social ecology highlights the people's solidarity economy practices that have been found in the past and present (Kawano, 2018), which are ignored by conventional economists of the market and the state.

Anarchism that speaks to the ever-present human desire for freedom, peace and justice, is integral to social ecology which envisions a decentralized, directly democratic society that is rooted in a maximization of freedom for the individual and a type of communism that is an expression of the axiom "From each according to their ability, to each according to their desire." Such an anarchist society is stateless, lacking completely the kinds of hierarchy and the forms of domination that so many in our culture believe to be an expression of 'human nature'. Rather the society self-organizes on the basis of habitation, work, or affinity, into human scaled communities where unmediated, face-to-face relationships, replace the faceless, bureaucratized, commodified institutions that rule our lives in contemporary society.

The second book is indeed a colourful political novel that explores the working out of social ecology ideas as also how memory and imagination inform social change in Loisaída which is a Spanglish nickname for the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City—a place of Hispanic New Yorkers as well as blacks, Polish-Americans, Jews and Italian-Americans, generally with low to moderate incomes. It is a place of the operationalization of grassroots efforts at community development without government assistance. We grasp community as an ecosystem, a set of interrelationships rooted in, conditioning and partly conditioned by the physical environment of the neighbourhood, as well as its cultural and political milieu.

The social ecology praxis resulting in community development at Loisaída in the mid-1970s, which is elaborated in the first book, is revelatory indeed as to how entropy can be replaced by evolution, and is an antidote to thinking about social ecology as a hallucination induced by ganja smoking. Loisaída was transformed as an ecological, self-reliant, directly-democratic neighbourhood built on the rubble of

a collapsed capitalist society. Noteworthy are the amazingly successful attempts of the Loisaída residents in utilizing alternative technology in the reconstruction of their community by using ecologically sound organic gardening and agricultural techniques to reintroduce food production to New York City; in developing low-cost ways to use solar energy to meet their energy needs; in recycling the wastes that littered their neighbourhood into resources for development; in transforming abandoned buildings into affordable tenant-owned cooperative housing through the process of urban homesteading; and in creating forms of social and political organization through which they tried to regain control over their lives and neighbourhood. How the larger economic and political forces of the city and nation-state conspired to prevent these developments from reaching their full potential is another story that needs to be known from the first book. However, the experience of Loisaída still has relevance to the issue of global warming: Its call for decentralized, democratically controlled, and humanly scaled technology are echoed today in the climate justice movement, which recognizes that industrial scaled and corporate controlled energy production, even if it is based on renewable resources, is still part and parcel of a capitalist society run amok, and, as such, fails to address not only the ecological concerns, but also the questions of social justice, democracy, and equity that were central to the alternative technology movement.

To conclude, we are facing an unprecedented ecological crisis of global dimensions due to our reliance on fossil fuels and chemical substances that are poisoning our earth, water and atmosphere. The solution to this crisis lies not just in dramatic shifts in policy from above; it requires that we begin to conceptualise and actualize new institutions and relationships that can move us away from these self- and socially destructive practices. Social ecology is the saviour of humans as also nonhumans in this regard.

If you are keen to transcend the shallow 'environmental management' or 'green capitalism' discourses and go into the depths of ideas and practices of this best interdisciplinary subject that can really save us and the planet, keep hitting

www.social-ecology.org Dan Chodorkoff was kind enough to give me pdf copies of these two books, and you can contact me to access them.

REFERENCE

Kawano, Emily. 2018. *Solidarity Economy: Building an Economy for People & Planet*. www.thenextsystem.org. May.