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# **Eco-Socialism and Decentralism**

**The Re-Development of Anarchism in the  
Ecology/Climate Justice Movement**

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From conservatives and liberals to Marxists, there is faith in big machines, big industries, big corporations, big cities, big countries, big buildings, and big government—a belief in the necessity of centralized, bureaucratic, top-down, socially-alienated, institutions. This is not to say that most people like giant cities, big business, or big government; but they do not see any alternative.

Instead, anarchists have advocated localism, face-to-face direct democracy, self-governing agricultural-industrial communes, workers' self-management of industry, consumer cooperatives, appropriate technology, and federations and networks of such radically-democratic institutions. Many people reject anarchism because they believe such decentralism to be unrealistic.

However, in our time there is a new development: writers and theorists of the ecology/environmental/climate-justice movement have been raising decentralist concepts as part of their programs. They include moderate liberals, radical ecologists, and even Marxists. Mostly they have no idea that they are redeveloping anarchism. I will examine this phenomenon.

## **Anarchist Decentralism**

Of a cooperative, socialist (or communist), society, the anarchist Peter Kropotkin wrote in 1905, "*True progress lies in the direction of decentralization, both territorial and functional, in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound, in lieu of the present hierarchy from the center to the periphery.*" (Kropotkin 2002; 286)

Paul Goodman put it this way: "*Decentralization is not lack of order or planning, but a kind of coordination that relies on different motives from top-down direction....It is not 'anarchy.'* [Mean-

ing: it is not ‘chaos.’—WP]...*Most anarchists, like the anarcho-syndicalists or the community-anarchists, have not been ‘anarchists’ either, but decentralists.*” (Goodman 1965; 6)

Capitalism by its nature is centralized. A tiny minority of the population dominates the whole society and all its institutions. The production system is one of exploitation; the minority of owners, and their managers, make all decisions, while the workers follow orders. The workers produce society’s wealth but receive only a fraction of it in payment, because the capitalists own the means of production (capital).

Under the pressure of competition, capitalist enterprises grow ever larger. They are under the imperative to grow or die. The economy becomes dominated by semi-monopolies, which now span the world market. The giant corporations justify themselves by claiming to be more efficient in producing and distributing commodities. Sometimes this is true, but often it is not. Capitalism is motivated to produce greater profit (surplus value), not more useful goods (use value). Often the corporations grow for financial reasons which have nothing to do with productive efficiency. They may grow in order to better control the work force or for increased access to markets. Both to serve them and to control them (in the overall interests of the capitalist class), giant corporations require giant bureaucratic-military states.

Revolutionary anarchist-socialists seek to abolish all rule by minorities, all exploitation, and all forms of oppression. They want a classless, oppressionless, society of participatory democracy. They want everyone to be involved in managing their own society, politically, economically, and culturally, at every level and in every way. This requires that institutions, at the daily, lived, level, be small enough for working people to understand and control them. It requires that small groups meet face-to-face to discuss and decide how they will deal with most issues—in the workplace or the neighborhood. It requires directly-democratic assemblies, in the work shop

than profit, democratically self-managed in the workplace and the community, and federated together from the local level to national and international levels. This is eco-socialism in the form of eco-anarchism.

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poses on enterprises though competition. To repeat: it drives the economy toward accumulation, increasing growth, greater profits, and continual quantitative expansion. Its law is grow-or-die.

This has at least three important effects. For one, an economy built on continuous growth must be in conflict with natural ecologies which require harmonious balance and dynamic stability. Capitalism treats nature as an endless mine, with natural resources as apparently free gifts. This is true whether the competitive enterprises are big or small.

A second effect is the inevitable tendency of smaller enterprises to grow into bigger ones. The drive to accumulate more than its competitors pushes each firm to grow as big as it can. So even if capitalism (or any other imagined competitive economy) were to magically be returned to its original state of small firms, it would once again grow into gigantic semi-monopolies.

Third, through its drive to accumulate, capitalism produces a work force which must be exploited. If the working class got back all that it produced, then there would be no capitalist accumulation. Market-driven accumulation contradicts any goal of worker industrial democracy.

However, the existing system of global semi-monopoly capitalism has created a larger international working class than ever before in history. (The relative “de-industrialization” of the U.S. goes together with “outsourcing,” which creates more industrial workers elsewhere.) Unfortunately, none of the authors cited above refer to the importance and potential power of that international working class. With its hands on the means of production and distribution and communication, the working class is a force which could end capitalism’s drive to ecological disaster. (Even Magdoff and his co-thinkers at Monthly Review are uncertain about the role of the working class.)

In short, capitalism should be replaced by a society which is decentralized but also cooperative, producing for use rather

and the community. There ordinary people will decide on overall concerns, and—where necessary—elect people to do specialized tasks or to go to meetings with elected people from other assemblies (elected officials being subject to immediate recall, rotation in office, and the same standard of living as everyone else). Radical democracy requires reorganizing our cities, our industries, and our technology, to create a world without order-givers and order-takers.

Anarchists recognize the need for a certain amount of centralization and big institutions. They believe that self-managing industries and communities should be embedded within regional, national, and international federations—associations of associations. Such bottom-up federations can coordinate exchanges of goods and can make decisions on world-wide concerns. But no matter how large they grow, they are still rooted in the face-to-face self-government of people’s daily lives. (This is different from today where people vote every few years for someone to go far away to “be political” for them—and then the voters return to their daily lives of taking orders from their bosses.)

When everyone participates in governing, then there is no “government” (no bureaucratic-military state organization separate from and above the rest of society). There is just the self-organization of the people—of the (formerly) working class and oppressed people.

The anarchist rule is: As much decentralization as is practically possible; and only as much centralization as is necessary. *“We are in a period of excessive centralization....In many functions this style is economically inefficient, technologically unnecessary, and humanly damaging. Therefore we might adopt a political maxim: to decentralize where, how, and how much [as] is expedient. But where, how, and how much are empirical questions.”* (Goodman 1965; 27)

Anarchists claim that productive technology could be used decentrally to create a society with sufficient goods for every-

one and plenty of leisure for all. There is a great deal of evidence that technology can be modified and re-created to be consistent with a creative, self-managing, and decentralized socialist economy.—which does not deny that there would still be some large machines and factories, as well as networks of smaller devices—such as the Internet. (For decentralizing technology, see Carson 2010; McRobie 1981; Sclove 1995.)

## Other Decentralists

There have also been non-anarchist and non-socialist decentralists, such as Catholic distributivists, students of Ralph Borsodi, cooperators, New Age theorists, “small-is-beautiful” technologists, and others. (See Loomis 1982.) Some were inspired by the tradition of Thomas Jefferson. Impressed by the New England town meetings, he wanted to promote a federation of local community “wards.”

*“Where every man is a sharer in the direction of his ward-republic...and feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but every day; when there shall not be a man in the State who will not be a member of some one of its councils, great or small, he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte.”* (Jefferson 1957; 54)

Unfortunately, the concept of decentralized democracy has been abandoned by modern day liberals (John Dewey was one exception). Instead, the language of “state’s rights,” “federalism,” and “small government” have been monopolized by the right. They use it to justify oppression of People of Color, opposition to regulation of big business, and the cutting of government support for the working class and the environment. Meanwhile these supposed advocates of “small government” advocate expansion of the military, more power to the police, and laws limiting women’s reproductive rights. It is difficult

However, there is another reason for the spread of decentralist ideas (that is, essentially anarchism). The radical alternative to our capitalist society used to be Marxism. But Marxism has been discredited in the eyes of many people, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of Maoist China. All of the quoted writers, except Magdoff, reject “socialism.” They identify it with government-owned, centralized, and top-down planned economies. (Historically, Magdoff’s co-thinkers have also identified “socialism” in this way—except that they were for it.) Yet today, the idea that we could solve fundamental problems by increased state action, centralization of industry, and totalitarian politics, does not appeal. But capitalism is barreling down the highway to its own destruction, and the destruction of humanity and the living world. So people are looking for a different approach.

## Eco-Socialism: Decentralism is Not Enough

But decentralization is not enough. All the theorists quoted above—with the exception of the Marxist Magdoff—are still essentially for capitalism. They want worker-managed enterprises and consumer cooperatives—to compete on a market with each other and with capitalist corporations. These corporations would still exist, even if with more rights for workers and consumers, smaller size, and more regulation by the government—but still functioning on the competitive market.

In contrast, anarchist-socialists oppose profit-making firms and corporations and the market. They are eco-socialists. They advocate that self-managed, cooperative, enterprises network and federate with each other, to create a democratically planned economy from below.

The market is not a democratic people-managed economy. It runs according to its own spontaneous laws, which it im-



## Why Decentralism?

I could cite many more ecologically-minded activists and scholars. These theorists are not anarchists and (except for Magdoff) not socialists or revolutionaries. They come out of traditions of liberalism and/or Marxism which have historically been centralistic and statist. In the past, a frequent response to environmental and ecological problems was to advocate economic planning and state intervention. (Nor would anarchists deny the need for some degree of federalized economic coordination—but not by these bureaucratic-military-capitalist national states!) Yet here they are arguing for increased decentralization, localism, direct democracy, and worker management of industry! Without knowing it apparently, they are recreating anarchism (or aspects of anarchism) for ecological reasons. (For more on ecology and anarchism see Bookchin, 1980; Purchase 1994.)

These are ecological-environmental reasons for decentralism. If we are to cut back on energy consumption (and end carbon-based fuel use altogether), we need to decrease transportation and travel. That in itself speaks to the need for local industry, consumption near production, and workplaces near housing—not necessarily in the immediate community, but at least in the region. Renewable energy sources tend to come in small packets, when using wind, solar power, geothermal, and water. Therefore small and local production and consumption makes sense, as opposed to giant factories and mega-cities. The same is true when using natural resources with the least side effects of destruction or pollution, so these effects may be easily cleaned up. Democratic economic planning is also easier to do on a local or regional level, if we want widespread participation. At the same time, the Internet and other media make coordination-from-below among vast regions easier than ever before.

for modern liberals to counter these false claims due to liberal statism and centralism.

In this period, there has been an explosion of advocacy of worker-managed enterprises (producers' cooperatives). This has been promoted by a range of theorists, from liberals to revolutionary Marxists. It has been experimented with—largely successfully. (For the discussions about worker-managed enterprises, see Price 2014.)

There were decentralist elements in Marxism (the Marxism of Marx and Engels, anyway). Mostly these reflected the influence of pre-Marxist “utopian” socialists. These elements included positive comments about worker-run cooperatives; discussion of the radical democracy of the 1871 Paris Commune; prediction of the end, under communism, of the division between town and country—industry and agriculture—due to the widespread distribution of towns; and prediction of the end of the division between mental and manual labor (order giving and order carrying out). (See Engels 1954; Marx & Engels 1971.) However, such elements of decentralization were buried in other aspects of Marx's program, such as advocating a new state which would nationalize and centralize all industry. Utopian, decentralist, aspects dropped out of post-Marx Marxism.

## Decentralism in Current Ecological Politics

Bill McKibben has long been a leader of the climate justice movement. Politically he is a left-liberal, an endorser of Sanders for President. One of his books (2007) is subtitled, “*The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*.” He reviews the dangers of “*nitrogen runoff, mercury contamination, rainforest destruction, species extinction, water shortage...[and] the overarching one: climate change*.” (19) His main solution

to these (and other) ills is decentralization: “*more local economies, shorter supply lines, and reduced growth.*” (180) “*...Development...should look to the local far more than to the global. It should concentrate on creating and sustaining strong communities...*” (197) “*...The increased sense of community and heightened skill at democratic decision-making that a more local economy implies will not simply increase our levels of satisfaction with our lives, but will also increase our chances of survival...*” (231)

A more extreme ecological perspective is raised by James H. Kunstler (2006)—although the author describes himself as “a registered Democrat.” (324) In “*The Long Emergency*,” he advances evidence that our society will run out of fossil-fuel—although not necessarily in time to avoid climate change. (He would regard the current oil glut as temporary.) “*...There will still be plenty of oil left in the ground...but it will be...deeper down, harder and costlier to extract, sitting under harsh and remote parts of the world...[and] contested by everyone.*” (65) This will end globalized industrialism as we know it.

To cope with this change “*... Life...will become increasingly and intensely local and smaller in scale... All human enterprises will contract with the energy supply.*” (238-9) “*We will have to reestablish those local webs of economic relations and occupations that existed all over America until the last several decades of the both century, meaning local and regional distribution networks...*” (259)

One of the most influential texts on global warming is Naomi Klein’s “*This Changes Everything*.” She declares, “*There is a clear and essential role for national plans and policies....But...the actual implementation of a great many of these plans [should] be as decentralized as possible. Communities should be given new tools and powers....Worker-run co-ops have the capacity to play a huge role in an industrial transformation.... Neighborhoods [should be] planned democratically by their residents....Farming...can also become an expanded sector of*

*decentralized self-sufficiency and poverty reduction.*” (Klein, 2014; 133-134)

To refer to another authority: Pope Francis, in his 2015 “*Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality*,” cites “*the principle of subsidiarity.*” (120) That is the principle that social functions should be as decentralized and localized as much as is realistically possible. “*Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt clear and firm measures in support of small producers and differentiated production.*” (79-80) “*In some places, cooperatives are being developed to exploit renewable sources of energy which ensure local self-sufficiency...*” (109) “*New forms of cooperation and community organization can be encouraged in order to defend the interests of small producers and preserve local ecosystems from destruction.*” (111)

Writers for the Marxist journal *Monthly Review* have argued that only an international socialist revolution will make it possible to prevent climate catastrophe. This much anarchists can agree with, but the *Monthly Review*’s trend has historically identified “socialism” with centralized Stalinism. Over the years, its editors and writers have supported Stalin’s Soviet Union, Maoist China, and (still) Castroite Cuba.

However, one of their main writers is Fred Magdoff (a professor of plant and soil science). He wrote a visionary essay presenting “*An Ecologically Sound and Socially Just Economy.*” “*Each community and region should strive, within reason, to be as self-sufficient as possible with respect to basic needs such as water, energy, food, and housing. This is not a call for absolute self-sufficiency but rather for an attempt to...lessen the need for long distance transport....Energy...[should be] used near where it was produced....Ecologically sound and productive agriculture...will take more people working smaller farms...to produce high yields per hectare....People will be encouraged to live near where they work...*” (Magdoff, 2014; 30–31) Also, “*Workplaces (including farms) will be controlled and managed by the workers and communities in which they are based.*” (29)