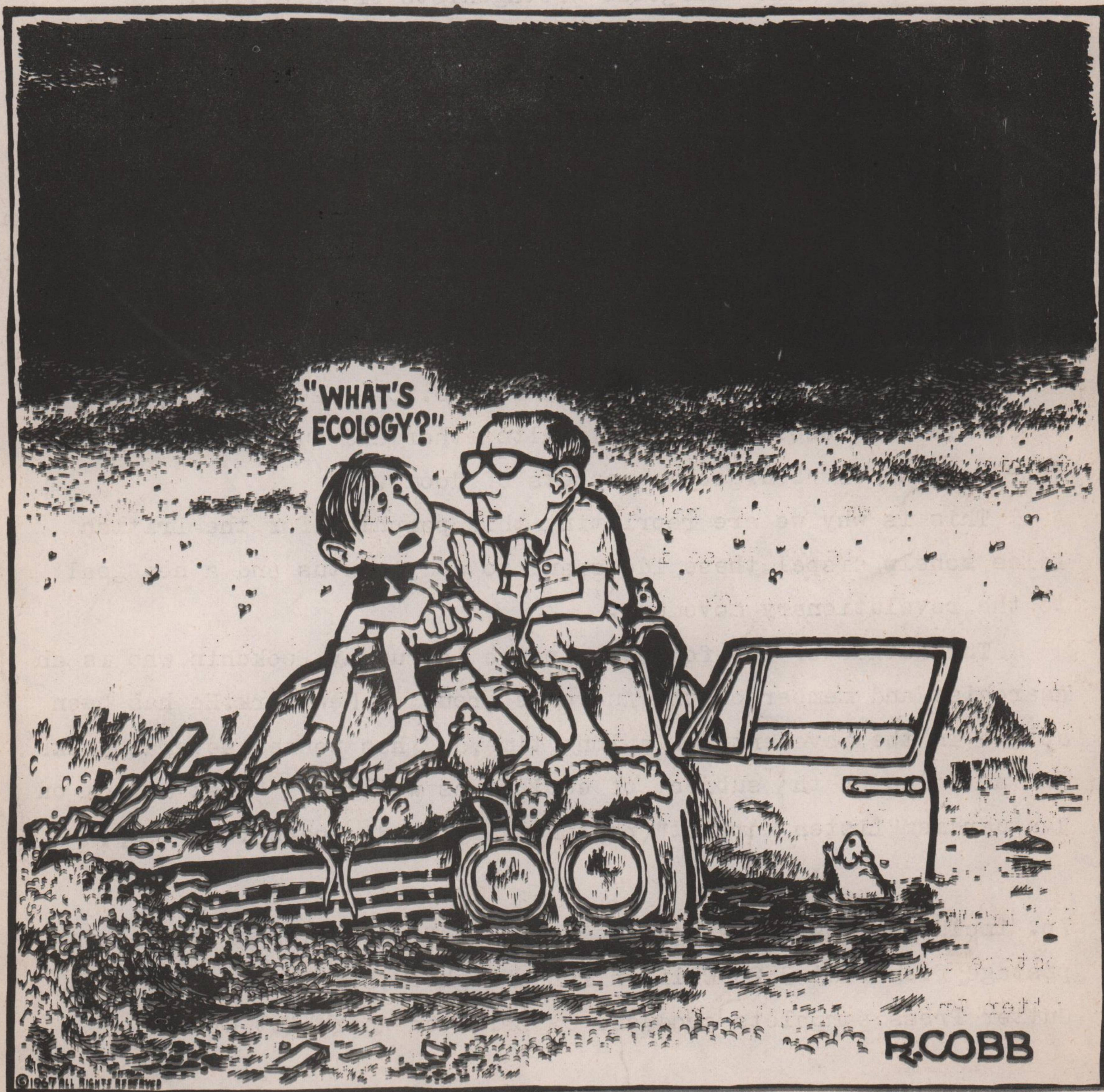


Towards an Ecological Solution

MURRAY BOOKCHIN



An Anarchist View of Pollution

GUTTER PRESS PAMPHLET ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of our pamphlets and covers the subject of ecology from an Anarchist viewpoint. We have been hearing too much lately from the "liberal" ecologists, and also those reactionaries of the school of Ehrlich who blame most of the evils of pollution on the fornicating masses, an archetypal middle class view pervades the thinking of the latter. The sexually irresponsible working class, the poor, are in the position they are because they have too many children. Always it is the poor who must limit their families and not the bourgeois protagonists of this view.

On the other side, we have the Marxists who push the line that Man must dominate over Nature e.g. the "Where We Stand" in "Socialist Worker" every week contains the phrase "We must increase Man's power over Nature". This view was understandable at the end of the last century, when Marx, and almost every other radical, were of the opinion that Man would progress in inexorable fashion towards a better society, -facilitated by the growth of industrialism. Now, however, the myth of "Progress" has been shattered and these views are no longer so understandable - indeed they are disastrous. Some Maoists go so far as to dismiss the ecological crisis altogether and put it down to the fabrications of "bourgeois prophets of doom".

This is why we are reprinting this pamphlet for the British Isles to help dispel these ideas, and to add impetus and a new goal to the revolutionary movement.

The author of the following piece is Murray Bookchin who is an Anarchist and member of the Anarchos group of New York. He has been active in the movement for a long time, and has penned several books and articles on the subject of ecology, as well as a brisk attack on vanguardism "Listen Marxist" (reprinted by Leeds Anarchist Group)

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Foreword.

Until recently, attempts to resolve the contradictions created by urbanization, centralization, bureaucratic growth, and statification were viewed as a vain counterdrift to "progress" - a counterdrift that, at best, could be dismissed as chimerical and, at worst, reactionary. The anarchist was regarded as a forlorn visionary, a social outcast, filled with nostalgia for the peasant village or the medieval commune. His yearnings for a decentralized society, for a humanistic community at one with nature and the needs of the individual - spontaneous and unfettered by authority - were viewed as the reactions of a romantic, of a declassed craftsman or an intellectual "misfit". His protest against centralization and statification seemed all the less persuasive because it was supported primarily by ethical considerations, by utopian, ostensibly "unrealistic" notions of what man could be, not what he was. To this protest, opponents of anarchist thought - liberals, rightists, and authoritarian "leftists" argued that they were the voices of historic reality, that their statist, centralist, and political notions were rooted in the objective, practical world.

Time is not very kind to the conflict of ideas. Whatever may have been the validity of libertarian and non-libertarian views a few generations ago, historical development has rendered virtually all objections to anarchist thought meaningless today. The modern city and state, the massive coal-steel technology of the Industrial Revolution, the later, more rationalized systems of mass production and assembly-line systems of labor organization, the centralized nation, the state and its bureaucratic apparatus - all, have reached their limits, whatever progressive or liberatory role they may have possessed has clearly become entirely regressive and oppressive. They are regressive not only because they erode the human spirit and drain the community of all its cohesive, solidarity, and ethico-cultural standards: they are regressive from an objective standpoint, from an ecological standpoint. For they undermine not only the human spirit and the human community but also the viability of the planet and all living things on it.

From: Murray Bookchin's, Ecology and Revolutionary Thought.

Towards an ecological solution

Popular alarm over environmental decay and pollution did not emerge for the first time merely in the late '60's, nor for that matter is it the unique response of the present century. Air pollution, water pollution, food adulteration and other environmental problems were public issues as far back as ancient times, when notions of environmental diseases were far more prevalent than they are today. All of these issues came to the surface again with the Industrial Revolution - a period which was marked by burgeoning cities, the growth of the factory system, and an unprecedented befouling and polluting of air and waterways.

Today the situation is changing drastically and at a tempo that portends a catastrophe for the entire world of life. What is not clearly understood in many popular discussions of the present ecological crisis is that the very nature of the issues has changed, that the decay of the environment is directly tied to the decay of the existing social structure. It is not simply certain malpractices or a given spectrum of poisonous agents that is at stake, but rather the very structure of modern agriculture, industry and the city. Consequently environmental decay and ecological catastrophe cannot be averted merely by increased programs like "pollution control" which deal with sources rather than systems. To be commensurate to the problem the solution must entail far-reaching evolutionary changes in society and man's relation to man.

(1)

To understand the enormity of the ecological crisis and the sweeping transformation it requires, let us briefly revisit the "pollution problem" as it existed a few decades ago. During the 1930's pollution was primarily a muckraking issue, a problem of expose journalism typified by Kallet and Schlink's "100 Million Guinea Pigs."

This kind of muckraking literature still exists in abundance and finds an eager market among consumers, that is to say, a public that seeks personal and legislative solutions to pollution problems.

Its supreme pontiff is Ralph Nader, an energetic young man who has shrewdly combined traditional muckraking with a safe form of "New Left" activism. In reality, Nader's emphasis belongs to another historical era, for the magnitude of the pollution problem has expanded beyond the most exaggerated accounts of the 30's. The new pollutants are no longer "poisons" in the popular sense of the term; rather they belong to the problems of ecology, not merely pharmacology, and these do not lend themselves to legislative redress.

What now confronts us is not the predominantly specific, rapidly degradable poisons that alarmed an earlier generation, but long-lived carcinogenic and mutagenic agents, such as radioactive isotopes and chlorinated hydrocarbons. These agents become part of the very anatomy of the individual by entering his bone structure, tissues and fat deposits. Their dispersion is so global that they become part of the anatomy of the environment itself. They will be within us and around us for years to come, in many cases for generations to come. Their toxic effects are usually chronic rather than acute; the deadly and mutational effects they produce in the individual will not be seen until many years have passed. They are harmful not only in large quantities, but in trace amounts; as such, they are not detectable by human senses or even, in many cases, by conventional methods of analysis. They damage not only specific individuals but the human species as a whole and virtually all other forms of life.

No less alarming is the fact that we must drastically revise our traditional notions of what constitutes an environmental "pollutant". A few decades ago it would have been absurd to describe carbon dioxide and heat as "pollutants" in the customary sense of the term. Yet in both cases they may well rank among the most serious sources of future ecological imbalance and pose major threats to the viability of the planet. As a result of industrial and domestic combustion activities, the quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased by roughly 25 per cent in the past 100 years, a figure that may well double again by the end of the century. The famous "greenhouse effect" which increasing quantities of the gas is expected to produce, has already been widely discussed: eventually, it is supposed the gas will inhibit the dissipation of the earth's heat into space causing a rise in overall temperatures which will melt the polar ice caps and result in an inundation of vast coastal areas. Thermal pollution, the result mainly of warm water discharged by nuclear and conventional power plants, has disastrous effects on the ecology of lakes, rivers and estuaries. Increases in water temperature

not only damage the physiological and reproductive activities of fish; they also promote the great blooms of algae that have become such formidable problems in waterways.

What is at stake in the ecological crisis we face today is the very capacity of the earth to sustain advanced forms of life. The crisis is being drawn together by massive increases in "typical" forms of air and water pollution; by a mounting accumulation of nondegradable wastes, lead residues, pesticide residues and toxic additives in food; by the expansion of cities into vast urban belts; by increasing stresses due to congestion, noise and mass living; by the wanton scarring of the earth as a result of mining operations, lumbering, and real estate speculation. The result of all this is that the earth within a few decades has been despoiled on a scale that is unprecedented in the entire history of human habitation on the planet.

Finally, the complexity and diversity of life which marked biological evolution over many many many millions of years is being replaced by a simpler, more synthetic and increasingly homogenised environment. Aside from any esthetic considerations, the elimination of this complexity and diversity may prove to be the most serious loss of all. Modern society is literally undoing the work of organic evolution. If this process continues unabated, the earth may be reduced to a level of biotic simplicity where humanity - whose welfare depends profoundly upon the complex food chains in the soil, on the land surface and in the oceans - will no longer be able to sustain itself as a viable animal species.

(2)

In recent years a type of biological "cold warrior" has emerged who tends to locate the ecological crisis in technology and population growth, thereby divesting it of its explosive social content. Out of this focus has emerged a new version of "original sin" in which tools and machines, reinforced by sexually irresponsible humans, so the

COMING SOON!
anton pannekoek's 'way
to workers control' ~

argument goes, must be curbed-if not voluntarily, then by the divine institution called the state.

The naivete of this approach would be risible were it not for its sinister implications. History has known of many different forms of tools and machines, some of which are patently harmful to human welfare and the natural world, others of which have clearly improved the condition of man and the ecology of an area. It would be absurd to place plows and mutagenic defoliants, weaving machines and automobiles, computers and moon rockets, under a common rubric. Worse, it would be grossly misleading to deal with these technologies in a social vacuum.

Technologies consist not only of the devices humans employ to mediate their relationship with the natural world, but also the attitudes associated with these devices. The attitudes are distinctly social products, the results of the social relationships humans establish with each other. What is clearly needed is not a mindless deprecation of technology as such, but rather a reordering and redevelopment of technologies according to ecologically sound principles. We need an ecotechnology that will help harmonise society with the natural world.

The same over-simplification is evident in the neo-Malthusian alarm over population growth. The reduction of population growth to a mere ratio between birth rates and death rates obscures the many complex social factors that enter into both statistics. A rising or declining birth rate is not a simple biological datum, any more than is a rising or declining death rate. Both are subject to the influences of the economic status of the individual, the nature of the family structure, the values of society, the status of women, the attitude towards children, the culture of the community, and so forth. A change in any single factor interacts with the remainder to produce the statistical data called "birth rate" and "death rate". Culled from such abstract ratios, population growth rates can easily be used to foster authoritarian controls and finally a totalitarian society, especially if neo-Malthusian propaganda and the failure of voluntary birth control are used as an excuse. In arguing that forcible measures of birth control and a calculated policy of indifference to hunger may eventually be necessary to stabilise world populations, the neo-Malthusians are already creating a climate of opinion that will make genocidal policies and authoritarian institutions socially acceptable.

It is supremely ironic that coercion, so clearly implicit in the neo-Malthusian outlook, has acquired a respected place in the public

debate on ecology—for the roots of the ecological crisis lie precisely in the coercive basis of modern society. The notion that man must dominate nature emerges directly from the domination of man by man. The patriarchal family may have planted the seed of domination in the nuclear relations of humanity; the classic split between spirit and reality; indeed; mind and labour—may have nourished it; the anti-naturalistic bias of Christianity may have tended to its growth; but it was not until organic community relations, be they tribal, feudal or peasant in form, dissolved into market relationships that the planet itself was reduced to a resource for exploitation.

This centuries-long tendency finds its most exacerbating development in modern capitalism: a social order that is orchestrated entirely by the maxim "Production for the sake of production!" Owing to its inherently competitive nature, bourgeois society not only pits humans against each other, but the mass of humanity against the natural world. Just as men are converted into commodities, so every aspect of nature is converted into a commodity, a resource to be manufactured and merchandised wantonly. Entire continental areas in turn are converted into factories and cities into marketplaces. The liberal euphemisms for these unadorned terms are "growth", "industrial society" and "urban blight". By whatever language they are described, the phenomena have their roots in the domination of man by man.

As technology develops, the maxim "Production for the sake of production" finds its complement in "Consumption for the sake of consumption". The phrase "consumer society" completes the description of the present social order as an "industrial society". Needs are tailored by the mass media to create a public demand for utterly useless commodities, each carefully engineered to deteriorate after a predetermined period of time. The plundering of the human spirit by the marketplace is paralleled by the plundering of the earth by capital. The tendency of the liberal to identify the marketplace with human needs, and capital with technology, represents a calculated error that neutralises the social thrust of the ecological crisis.

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The strategic ratios in the ecological crisis are not the population rates of India but the production rates of the United States, a country that produces more than 50 per cent of the world's goods. Here, too, liberal euphemisms like affluence conceal the critical thrust of a blunt word like "waste". With a vast section of its industrial capacity committed to war production, the U.S. is literally trampling upon the earth and shredding ecological links that are vital to human survival. If current industrial projections prove to be accurate, the remaining 30 years of the century will witness a five-fold increase in electrical power production, based mainly on nuclear fuels and coal. The colossal burden of radioactive wastes and other effluents that this increase will place on the natural ecology of the earth hardly needs description.

In shorter perspective, the problem is no less disquieting. Within the next five years, lumber production may increase an overall 20 per cent; the output of paper, five per cent annually; folding boxes, three per cent annually; metal cans, four to five per cent annually; plastics (which currently form one to two per cent of municipal wastes) seven per cent annually. Collectively, these industries account for the most serious pollutants in the environment. The utterly senseless nature of modern industrial activity is perhaps best illustrated by the decline in returnable (and reusable) beer bottles from 54 billion bottles in 1960 to 26 billion today. Their place has been taken over by "one way" bottles (a rise from 8 to 21 billion in the same period) and cans (an increase from 38 to 53 billion). The "one way" bottles and cans, of course, pose tremendous problems in solid waste disposal, but they do sell better.

It may be that the planet, conceived as a lump of minerals, can support these mindless increases in the output of trash. The earth, conceived of as a complex web of life, certainly cannot. The only question is, can the earth survive its looting long enough for man to replace the current destructive social system with a humanistic, ecologically oriented society.

The apocalyptic tone that marks so many ecological works over the past decade should not be taken lightly. We are witnessing the end of the world, although whether this world is a long established social order or the earth as a living organism still remains in question. The ecological crisis, with its threat of human extinction, has developed appositely to the advance of technology, with its promise of abundance, leisure and material security. Both are converging

toward a single focus: At a point where the very survival of man is being threatened, the possibility of removing him from the trammels of domination, material scarcity and toil has never been more promising. The very technology that has been used to plunder the planet can now be deployed, artfully and rationally, to make it flourish.

It is necessary to overcome not only bourgeois society but also the long legacy of propertied society: the patriarchal family, the city, the state--indeed, the historic splits that separated mind from sensuousness, individual from society, town from country, work from play, man from nature. The spirit of spontaneity and diversity that permeates the ecological outlook toward the natural world must now be directed toward revolutionary change and utopian reconstruction in the social world. Propertied society, domination, hierarchy and the state, in all their forms, are utterly incompatible with the survival of the biosphere. Either ecology action is revolutionary action or it is nothing at all. Any attempt to reform a social order that by its very nature pits humanity against all the forces of life is a gross deception and serves merely as a safety valve for established institutions.

The application of ecological principles to social reconstruction on the other hand, opens entirely new opportunities for imagination and creativity. The cities must be decentralised to serve the interests of both natural and social ecology. Urban gigantism is devastating not only to the land, the air, the waterways, and the local climate, but to the human spirit. Having reached its limits in the megapolis--an urban sprawl that can best be described as the non-city--the city must be replaced by a multitude of diversified, well-rounded communities each scaled to human dimensions and to the carrying capacity of its ecosystem. Technology, in turn, must be placed in the service of meaningful human needs, its output gauged to permit a careful recycling of wastes into the environment.

With the community and its technology sculptured to human scale it should be possible to establish new, diversified energy patterns: the combined use of solar power, wind power and a judicious use of fossil and nuclear fuels. In this decentralised society, a new sense of tribalism, of face-to-face relations, can be expected to replace the bureaucratic institutions of propertied society and the state. The earth would be shared communally, in a new spirit of harmony between man and man and between man and nature.

In the early years of the 19th century, this image of a new, free and stateless society was at best a distant vision, a humanistic

ideal which revolutionaries described as communism or anarchism, and their opponents as utopia. As the one century passed into its successor, the advance of technology increasingly brought this vision into the realm of possibility. The ecological crisis of the late 20th century has now turned the possibility of its early decades into a dire necessity. Not only is humanity more prepared for the realisation of this vision than at any time in history—a fact intuited by the tribalism of the youth culture—but upon its realisation depends the very existence of humanity in the remaining years ahead.

Perhaps the most important message of Marx a century ago was the concept that humanity must develop the means of survival in order to live. Today, the development of a flexible, open-ended technology has reversed this concept completely. We stand on the brink of a post-scarcity society, a society that can finally remove material want and domination from the human condition. Perhaps the most important message of ecology is the concept that man must master the conditions of life in order to survive.

During the May-June uprising of 1968, the French students sensed the new equation in human affairs when they inscribed the demand "Be realistic! Do the impossible!" To this demand, the young Americans who face the next century can add the more solemn injunction: "If we don't do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable."

APPENDIX

The following are selections from the manifesto of Ecology Action East, an ecology group based in New York, who have developed a total critique of society in their analysis of the causes of pollution.

"By virtue of its unique cultural baggage, modern society—our profit oriented bourgeois society—tends to exacerbate humanity's conflict with nature in a more critical fashion than pre-industrial societies of the past. In bourgeois society, humans are not only turned into objects; they are turned into commodities; into objects explicitly designed for sale on the market place. Competition between human beings, qua commodities, becomes an end in itself, together with the production of utterly useless goods. Quality is turned into quantity individual culture into mass culture, personal communication into mass communication. The natural environment is turned into a gigantic factory, the city into an immense market place; everything from a Redwood forest to a woman's body has a "price". Everything is equatable

in dollar-and-cents, be it hallowed cathedral or individual honour. Technology ceases to be an extension of humanity; humanity becomes an extension of technology. The machine does not expand the power of the worker; the worker expands the power of the machine, indeed he becomes a mere part of the machine.

Is it suprising, then, that this exploitative, degrading, quantified society pits humanity against itself and against nature on a more awesome scale than any other in the past?

..... Ecology Action East has two primary aims: one is to increase in the revolutionary movement the awareness that the most destructive and pressing consequences of our alienating, exploitative society is the environmental crisis, and that any truly revolutionary society must be built on ecological precepts; the other is to create, in the minds of the millions of Americans who are concerned with the destruction of our environment, the consciousness that the principles of ecology carried to their logical end, demand radical changes in our society and our way of looking at the world.

Ecology Action East takes its stand with the life-style revolution that, at its best, seeks an expanded consciousness of experience and human freedom. We seek the liberation of women, of children, of gay people, of black people and colonial peoples, and of working people in all occupations as part of a growing social struggle against the age-old traditions and institutions of domination-traditions and institutions that have so destructively shaped humanity's attitude toward the natural world. We support libertarian communities and struggles for freedom wherever they arise; we take our stand with every effort to promote the spontaneous self-development of the young; we oppose every attempt to repress human sexuality, to deny humanity the eroticisation of experience in all its forms. We join in all endeavours to foster a joyous artfulness in life and work: the promotion of crafts and quality production, the design of new communities and ecotechnologies, the right to experience on a daily basis the beauty of the natural world, the open, unmediated, sensuous pleasure that humans can give to each other, the growing reverence for the world of life."