What is eco-anarchism?

Eco-anarchism is the form of political ecology that situates the political most deeply in Earth history and the crisis of the Earth. It can be traced back to the work of geographer-philosopher-revolutionary Jacques Élisée Reclus, who depicted Earth's history as a struggle for the free flourishing of both humanity and nature, and against the forces of domination that constrain that flourishing. Eco-anarchism as a form of radical communitarianism has a primary ecological commitment to promoting the flourishing of the entire global community-of-communities, and a primary anarchic commitment to defending that community from all destructive forces that would crush and extinguish it. Eco-anarchist politics has two major expressions. The first is direct action to prevent the developing social-ecological catastrophe, and the second is the struggle for a comprehensive programme for social and ecological regeneration and the creation of a free ecological society. These two approaches are illustrated here through the radical eco-defense organization Earth First! and through the Sarvodaya Movement for non-violent social transformation.

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"Humanity is Nature becoming self-conscious."

Élisée Reclus (Clark and Martin, 2013)

Eco-anarchism is the form of political ecology that situates the political most deeply in Earth history and in the crisis of the Earth. It holds that both our own future and the future of the planet depend on our ability to fulfil our destiny as a means through which the Earth thinks and acts for the common good of all beings. This is the vision developed by the 19th century French geographer and philosopher Jacques Élisée Reclus (1830–1905), the founder of modern eco-anarchist thought (Clark and Martin, 2013). He was the first thinker to develop in extensive detail the story of the Earth as a struggle for the free flourishing of both humanity and nature, and against the forces of domination that constrain that flourishing. This is the vision that is carried on today by the eco-anarchist tradition.

The core meaning of eco-anarchism is evident from the etymology of the term. It derives from the Ancient Greek *oikos*, meaning 'household' or 'home', and *anarche*, from *an*, meaning 'without', and *arche*, meaning loosely 'rule' or 'principle', and more precisely, 'domination.' Further, it is an abbreviated form of 'ec*ological* anarchism' and thus presupposes a third term, *logos*. The *logos* of any being is the way and the truth of that being, its mode of attaining its good. Eco-anarchism thus respects profoundly the *logos* of the *oikos*, its immanent order and self-development, and seeks to defend it from every *arche*, or form of domination.

But what is our *oikos*? The *oikos* is a kind of community, and specifically, the kind with which we identify as our *home*. Eco-anarchism is thus a form of *communitarianism* in the strongest sense of the term. It recognizes that we are members of communities within communities. Our *oikoi* include the primary intimate community of the family and small circle of close friends. They include our local and regional communities, both human and more-than-human. And they include, finally, and most importantly, the *oikos* of all *oikoi*, our global household, our home planet, Earth.

Eco-anarchism holds that we must, with the utmost urgency, begin to transform

ourselves into fully responsible members of the Earth Household. Such a vocation is an 'eco-anarchism' in that it expresses a primary *ecological* commitment to promoting the flourishing of the Earth community, and a primary *anarchic* commitment to defending that flourishing from all destructive forces that would crush and extinguish it.

Entering the Necrocene

Any political movement that is founded on a minimal level of sanity must be resolutely focused on the fact that we are in a period of extreme crisis in the history of the Earth. The Stockholm Resilience Centre very helpfully developed the concept of "planetary boundaries," beyond which there is a high likelihood of ecological disaster (Rockström *et al.*, 2009). The researchers identified such boundaries in the areas of climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, global freshwater use, rate of biodiversity loss, land-system change, chemical pollution and atmospheric aerosol loading. They concluded that transgressing even one planetary boundary might be catastrophic, but that three boundaries had already been transgressed and most others were being approached rapidly. Reports now appear daily of accelerating global crisis tendencies in many of these areas.

It has been widely suggested that the gravity of the global ecological crisis should be expressed by the idea that we have entered a new geological era called the 'Anthropocene' in which humans are identified as the cause of the crisis. An eco-anarchist approach rejects this strategy, since describing 'the' cause as a generic *Anthropos* or homogeneous humanity is an ideological distortion of specific global realities. In recognition of this distortion, others have suggested that we instead call our era the 'Capitalocene', in order to identify the real underlying cause as capitalism. This is a distinct advance towards a deeper, more concrete understanding. However, if we take such a 'real cause' approach, and follow an eco-anarchist analysis, we will need at least three terms to specify the nature of the causality. To specify the major determinants of crisis we will need 'Capitalocene' to identify Capital, 'Technocene' to identify the technological Megamachine (including the primordial Megamachine, the State), and, not least of all, 'Androcene' to identify Patriarchy.[1]

Yet, none of these terms describes precisely the nature of the transition from the previous geological era, the Cenozoic. 'Cenozoic' means 'new era of life' and describes what occurred in the biosphere and was recorded directly in the fossil record. Its successor must therefore focus not on what we or our institutions are doing, but on what the Earth itself is now undergoing. Thus, the most accurate, Earth-centered, term is 'Necrocene', the 'new era of death.' Ours is the age of die-off, of mass extinction of life on Earth, and this is what the fossil record will record.

A synonym for the Necrocene is the 'Thanatocene.' This term suggests that Earth's history has been a struggle between the forces of life, regeneration and creation, or *Eros*, and those of death, degeneration and domination, or *Thanatos*. The evolving richness and diversity of life on Earth has expressed the creative and liberatory work of Eros. The disappearance of species, populations, ecosystems, cultures and communities under the exterminist reign of Empire manifests the destructive and dominating work of Thanatos. In a world in which the all dominant political ideologies constitute the Party of Thanatos, eco-anarchism is the Party of Eros.

Understanding causes and conditions

To be an eco-anarchist is to recognize the urgent need in the Necrocene to transform all major spheres of social determination. It means realizing that at this point in Earth history it is too late to settle for the demonstrably ineffectual 'ambitiousness' of Climate Summits and similar exercises in the politics of the gesture. It means recognizing that the reigning system of domination is incapable of effective steering and self-correction. This means

"To be an eco-anarchist is to recognize the urgent need in the Necrocene to transform all major spheres of social determination."

simply that it is incapable of preventing collapse, because it operates according to structural rules that are themselves at the root of the problem. It follows that we must become acutely aware of how the major spheres of social determination operate, work diligently to develop our moral imagination and moral courage, and find ways to change the way those spheres operate.

While the processes of social determination are inseparable and mutually determining, we can divide them for analytical purposes into four spheres. Stated briefly, the *social institutional sphere* consists of the material and organizational structures of social determination. The *social ethos* denotes the constellation of social practices, feelings and sensibilities that constitute a way of life. The *social imaginary* refers to the sphere of the society's 'fundamental fantasy', as expressed in the prevailing self-images and dominant narratives. And the *social ideology* denotes systems of ideas that purport to be objective depictions of reality, but in fact systematically distort reality on behalf of particularistic interests. Under civilization, all these spheres of determination are shaped in ways that support systems of hierarchical, dualistic power – which means, today, global capitalism, the nation-state system, patriarchy and the technological megamachine.

If the present system of social determination continues, we are doomed to live under the yoke of social domination for a brief period in Earth history, after which the system will collapse, along with the biosphere. The solution to this problem is obvious. We need to act, as rapidly as possible, to replace the ecocidal social order with an Earth-affirming one that encompasses ecological social institutions, an ecological social ideology (or anti-ideology), an ecological social imaginary and an ecological social ethos.

A politics of direct action

Eco-anarchist politics has two primary aspects. The first consists of direct action to forestall the developing social and ecological catastrophe. The second encompasses a comprehensive programme for systemic change and the creation of a free ecological society – a politics of social transformation.

The eco-anarchist approach of direct action is exemplified by the work of the radical ecological movement Earth First! It is epitomized in the group's slogan, "No compromise in defense of Mother Earth." The movement's self-description begins with its concern about mass extinction and the devastation of the Earth and of the Earth-based ways of life (https://earthfirstjournal.org/about). It recognizes that the dominant order has done nothing to reverse the ecocidal course of history, and that militant direct action, including civil disobedience and ecotage, is necessary. Beyond this, we must participate actively in the Earth's processes of regeneration through ecological restoration.

Many other eco-defence movements have been heavily influenced by eco-anarchism, especially those involving the protection of the water, the land, and local human and ecological communities. A striking example is the protracted resistance movement against massive airport construction at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, near Nantes, France. The movement recently emerged victorious after forty years of direct-action struggle that included the permanent occupation of the contested area by a large community of resisters. Out of this effort and others came the concept of the ZAD, or *zone à défendre* (zone to defend). After construction was cancelled in January 2018, the *Zadistes* chose to fight eviction and remain on the land as an example of an autonomous, post-capitalist eco-community (https://zad.nadir.org).

A politics of social transformation

In our age of global ecological crisis, resistance to the dominant ecocidal order is essential. However, the crisis cannot be ended by resistance alone. It will require a vast social movement that is both integral and regenerative. It must offer not only a devastating critique of the dominant ecocidal system, but also a comprehensive

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and compelling vision of a free ecological society, addressing all important realms, including the ethical and spiritual, the political and economic, the practical and personal. Further, it must, based on this vision, begin in a very powerful and tangible way to "build the new world within the shell of the old."

Perhaps the most developed example in recent history of what this might mean is the Sarvodaya, or 'Welfare of All', Movement in India, also known as the 'Gandhian Movement' (Vettickal, 2002; Clark, 2013). Sarvodaya, whose members have been called "Gentle Anarchists" (Ostergaard and Currell, 1971), is known for leading the struggle to liberate India from the British Empire through *satyagraha*, or non-violent direct action. However, it was from the outset a broadly-based movement for social and ecological revolution. Its programme aimed at an ideal that Gandhi himself described as "an ordered anarchy" (Gandhi, 1940: 262).

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Sarvodaya's guiding moral and spiritual principles are focused on the pursuit of the common good and the elimination of domination. The Sanskrit word 'sarvodaya' can be translated as 'realization for all.' The movement's key ethical principle, *ahimsa*, means 'non-harm' (in effect, non-domination), and, stated positively, connotes acting with a deep respect for the sacredness or intrinsic good of all living beings. Thus, Sarvodaya shares the eco-anarchist ideal of a society based on non-domination and universal self-realization.

Sarvodayan politics and economics aims at a system of *swaraj* or democratic self-rule, focused at the level of the autonomous local community. In this system, the *chaupal*, or traditional common space at the center of the village, becomes the focal point for institutions of vigorous local democracy. One is the *panchayat*, or five-person village council, a traditional element of local governance. Another is the *gram sabha*, or village assembly, which is to become the ultimate repository of power in a developed system of communal democracy.

Swaraj also requires a democratic, community-controlled economic system, with production for real need. This cooperative system will practice *swadeshi*, bioregional production rooted in the land. Such a subsistence or sustenance economy will end exploitation of the workers and the land, preventing the ecological devastation that results from production for maximized profit. In order to create such a system, Sarvodaya established a campaign for *bhoodan* ('gift of land'), in which land was donated and pooled for cooperative village farming projects. Through this effort, 5 million acres of land were put into cooperative projects. The ultimate goal was *gramdan*, or 'gift of the village', in which all localities would be transformed into self-governing, largely self-sufficient eco-communities.

Another goal was to train a body of *gram sevaks*, full-time Sarvodaya community organizers. They were to go into each community to educate and assist it in self-organization according to the Sarvodayan vision. The movement would also train a *shanti sena*, that is, a 'peace army', or body of mediators. As part of the effort to end all forms of systemic violence, and to foster peaceful cooperation, the police power of the state would be progressively replaced by such a non-violent force.

One of the movement's most brilliant practical ideas was the creation of an *ashram* in each village and neighbourhood. In the Sarvodayan sense of this term, this means a political and spiritual base community in which the members live communally and spread Sarvodaya teachings through education, and, above all, the force of inspiring example. As a site for appropriate technologies and locally-based production, the *ashram* might also be called a model ecovillage. The hope was that every village and neighbourhood would contain a functioning example of the kind of cooperative, caring, life-affirming community that the entire society might become.

An emerging ecological society

Sarvodaya is invaluable as an example of a vast social movement with both anarchistic and ecological dimensions that undertook

institutional, imaginary, ideological and ethotic transformation on the level of a society of hundreds of millions. The point is not to replicate it, but to look to both its great successes and its significant failures for lessons that can be used in the creation of a viable movement for social-ecological transformation. Thus, eco-feminist Vandana Shiva and her colleagues at Navdanya Biodiversity Farm and Seed Bank in Dehradun, India, consciously carry on many aspects of the Gandhian tradition while radically ecologizing them through a more explicit emphasis on the centrality of the Earth and the land. In addition, they stress much more heavily the importance of overcoming the destructive forces of patriarchal domination and of liberating the feminine Shakti energy of birth, life and growth.

There are today significant movements that go even further in the direction of creating the kind of post-statist, post-capitalist, post-patriarchal ecological society envisioned by eco-anarchism. This is in part a retrieval and re-deployment of what was lost from previous pre-state, pre-capitalist, pre-patriarchal, Earth-based societies. Communal, participatory, radically democratic and consensus-based institutions have been common in these societies. For this reason, eco-anarchism recognizes indigenous movements as having a vastly greater significance than their mere numbers would indicate. They bring to the world an ancient, living history of communal democratic and consensual decision-making, recognition of the natural world as our own world, a deep sense of our kinship with all other living beings, remnants of the gift economy and a clear recognition of the importance of feminine, non-possessive values at the centre of culture and community.

We find these traditions expressed today, for example, in the Zapatista movement, which has created liberated municipalities in Chiapas, Mexico, that have transformed the lives of several hundred thousand people (Fitzwater, 2019). The movement is based largely on an indigenous, communal, egalitarian, nature-affirming worldview that is expressed in institutions such as local assemblies, councils and cooperatives, in which power is situated at the base. To take another example, in Rojava (western Kurdistan), the Democratic Autonomy Movement has inspired radical social transformation among several million people (Knapp *et al.*, 2016; Clark, 2019). The anarchistic dimensions of the movement are manifested in institutions of decentralized direct democracy such as local assemblies, councils and citizen's committees, in non-statist confederal organization, and in a significant ecological movement, Moreover, the Rojavan Revolution goes even beyond most anarchist movements in its commitment to radical feminist social transformation and the destruction of patriarchal domination.

In short, the eco-anarchist vision finds certain powerful expressions in the contemporary world that can offer inspiration to those who hope to see that vision challenge the dominant ecocidal order.

An awakened Earth community

Eco-anarchism sees the goal of freedom for both humanity and other-than-human nature as synonymous with the realization of the common good. This means the greatest flourishing of the local and global eco-communities, and the elimination of all forms of domination that constrain that flourishing. The motto of the project with which I work, La Terre Institute for Community and Ecology, is *appamāda*, an ancient Pali term known as "the last word of the Buddha." It has many English translations, but the best may be 'mindful care.' It expresses the idea that if we are to save ourselves, and more importantly, save the world from devastation, we must allow ourselves, as persons and communities, to awaken to the nature of all phenomena, and – especially at this moment – to the nature of the suffering that the Earth is undergoing. We must be acutely aware that such mindfulness is only authentic if it is expressed in appropriate action. This means, above all, mindful, engaged care for the good of all beings in the biosphere,

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and for the good of all terrestrial goods, the good of the Earth. Hence, *appamāda* might well be taken as a synonym for the practice of eco-anarchism. ■

Notes

1 The term 'megamachine' is, of course, borrowed from the seminal discussion in Mumford (1967; 1970).

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