

## **ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND HUMAN SOCIETY**

**Dr. Bhumida Sharma**

*Dev Samaj College for Women, Ferozepur City*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The relationship between Ecology and Society is constantly co-evolving and thus making them analytically inseparable. A change in human society corresponds with change in man's relationship with the rest of nature. Social Ecology is a critical social theory founded by American anarchist and libertarian socialist author Murray Bookchin. With an increasing interest in Environmental issues, it has recently become the much-discussed topic in the literary and social circles.*

*The ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Ecological problems cannot be understood, much less resolved, without facing social issues. Long before the emergence of industrialization, modern scientific and technical advancement, the hierarchical societies had begun despoiling of this beautiful planet. The notion of the natural world's separation from human culture appeared with the rise of hierarchy. The root cause of the Environmental pollution is not the technological advancement or industrial expansion but human mentality of domination. Social oppressive hierarchies and inequality are at the root of the problem. Only a transformed community can solve the environmental crisis.*

***Keywords: Ecology, Society, Hierarchy, Domination, Nature***

The intelligentsia, policy makers, philanthropists of the whole world in its national international seminars and discussions are echoing a common concern i.e. Environmental Crisis. The whole humanity is living under the fear of Doom's Day. Fortunately the emergence and new relevance of ecology reveal a growing dissatisfaction among thinking people with attempts to use our vast ecological problems for cheaply spectacular and politically manipulative ends. Ecology- the term is in vogue these days. There are strong communitarian implications in the very term 'Ecology'. Literally, it means the logos, the study of or reflection on the 'oikos' i.e. household in Greek. Ecology thus calls upon humanity to begin to think of the entire planet as a kind of community of which all human beings are members. It informs us that all of our problems, of any nature, are in a sense 'domestic' one. We are witnessing our forests disappear due to mindless cutting and increasing urbanization, the ozone layer thinning out because of the widespread use of fluorocarbons, toxic dumps getting multiplied all over the planet, highly dangerous radioactive pollutants entering into air, water, and food chains, and innumerable other hazards that threaten the integrity of life itself. The issue is of grave concern and not something that can be resolved merely by celebrating Earth Day clean-ups, lectures and discussions in seminars and faint-hearted changes in existing environmental laws.

## 2 Days International Conference on Recent Innovations in Engineering, Science, Humanities and Management

Dev Samaj College for Women, Ferozepur, Panjab (India)

18th -19th March 2017, [www.conferenceworld.in](http://www.conferenceworld.in)

(ICRIESHM-17)

ISBN: 978-93-86171-33-7

For good reason, more and more people are trying to go beyond the theoretical environmentalism of the early 1970s and develop a more fundamental, indeed a more radical, approach to the ecological crisis that this planet is facing. Man has started looking for an ecological approach that is rooted in an ecological philosophy, ethics, sensibility, image of nature, and ultimately for an ecological movement that will transform our domineering market society into a non-hierarchical cooperative society. This society is one that will live in harmony with nature because its members live in harmony with one another. This marvel we call 'nature' has produced a marvel we call homo sapiens- the thinking man, and more significantly for the development of society, thinking woman, whose primeval domestic domain provided the arena for the origins of a caring society, human empathy, love, and idealistic commitment. A feeling that is prevailing these days is that there is a connection between the way people deal with one another, the way they behave as social beings - men with women, old with young, rich with poor, whites with people of color, First World with Third World, elites with masses -and the way they deal with nature. Environmental concern is linked with individual as well as society.

Over the past quarter-century, a broad social and ecological philosophy has emerged under the name 'Social Ecology'. Social Ecology is an interdisciplinary field of academic study that investigates the interrelationship between human social institutions and ecological or environmental issues. It is closely related to human ecology, the area of the biological sciences that deals with the role of human beings in ecosystems. However, the studies in social ecology are much broader in scope, incorporating many areas of social and natural science in their analysis.

Social Ecology is a critical social theory founded by American libertarian socialist author Murray Bookchin. Bookchin is of the view that its not just industrialization, technological advancement and progress that is the root cause of our environmental pollution. Man has started the despoiling of nature even before that. In his *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971), *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980), and *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982), Bookchin suggests that the roots of current ecological and social problems can be traced to hierarchical modes of social organization.

While this philosophy has recently been most closely associated with the thought of social theorist Murray Bookchin, it continues a long tradition of ecological communitarian thought going back well into the nineteenth century. Philosophically, social ecology stems from a solid organismic tradition in Western philosophy that began with Heraclitus, the near-evolutionary dialectic of Aristotle and Hegel, the superbly critical approach of the renowned Frankfurt School and the primitivistic mysticism of Heidegger.

In its most authentic and deepest sense, Social Ecology is the awakening of man as a part of the community reflecting on itself, uncovering its history, exploring its present predicament, and contemplating its future. This awakening is a process of philosophical reflection. As a philosophical approach, social ecology investigates the ethical, ontological, political and epistemological dimensions of the relationship between the society and the

ecology. It seeks the practical wisdom that results from such reflection. It seeks to give us, as beings situated in the course of real human and natural history, guidance in facing specific opportunities as well as challenges.

The lineage of social ecology is often thought to originate in the mutualistic and communitarian ideas of the anarchist geographer Kropotkin (1842–1921). His ideas concerning political and economic decentralization, history of democracy, communitarian values and human-scaled production have all made important contributions to the concern of society for the environment. However, it is rooted much more deeply in the thought of another great thinker, the French geographer Elisée Reclus (1830–1905). Reclus believed that Humanity is Nature achieving self-consciousness. It is his idea of ‘social geography’ that formed the basis of the theory later termed as ‘social ecology’. Reclus explored the history of the interaction between the human society and the natural world. He started his studies with the emergence of homo-sapiens and extended it to the present age of urbanization, political and economic globalization and technological development. Reclus envisioned humanity achieving a free, communitarian society that is in harmony with the natural world. His extensive historical studies traced the long record of experiments in co-operation, direct democracy and human freedom. He presents an analysis of the destructive ecological effects of modern technology and industry along with the power of the state and the capital. It is really commendable that this recent interest in eco-philosophy and environmental ethics has its roots even a century ago in Reclus’ attempts to reconcile a concern for justice in human society with compassionate treatment of other species and the feeling of reverence for the whole of life on earth.

Many of the themes in Reclus’ work were developed further by the Scottish botanist and social thinker Patrick Geddes (1854–1932). Geddes talked of the philosophical study of the biosphere and termed it as ‘biosophy’. Geddes focused on the need to create decentralized communities in harmony with surrounding cultural and ecological regions and proposed the development of new technologies that would promote humane, ecologically-balanced communities. His vision was an organically developing cooperative society based on the practice of mutual aid at its most basic social levels.

Many of Geddes’ insights were later integrated into the expansive vision of society, nature, and technology of his disciple, the American historian and social theorist Lewis Mumford (1895–1992). Mumford is considered to be one of the most pivotal figures in the development of the social ecological tradition. Rama Chandra Guha is certainly right when he states that “[t]he range and richness of Mumford’s thought mark him as the pioneer American social ecologist ...” Most of the fundamental concepts of Bookchin’s ‘social ecology’ were borrowed from Mumford’s much earlier ecological regionalism. The philosophical basis for Mumford’s social analysis is an organic view of reality, a holistic and developmental approach he explicitly identifies as an ‘ecological’ one. With this outlook, he sees the evolution of human society as a continuation of a cosmic process of organic growth, emergence, and development. He also sees human history as the scene of a counter-movement within society and nature, a growing process of mechanization.

Bookchin is the one who has broadened the theoretical basis of the communitarian, organicist, and regionalist tradition developed by Reclus, Geddes and Mumford. He makes the most significant contributions to the further development of social ecology by making dialectical analysis a central focus. He opens the way for more critical and theoretically sophisticated discussions of concepts like unity-in-diversity, holism, development and relatedness. He develops the earlier existing views in an ecological theoretical perspective. Man is one among millions of organisms living on this earth. Bookchin emphasizes that human beings are basically just somewhat highly intelligent primates. We all are a part of nature. The idea that we are 'the superior ones' is simply superficial and potentially misanthropic. Far from being natural, humans are an expression of a natural process. Man is just nature that has attained awareness of his being.

Bookchin believes that human consciousness is a result of nature striving for increasing complexity and awareness. We are part of the biological evolution, which Bookchin calls 'first Nature', but also have a unique social awareness which he calls 'second nature'. Our 'first nature' keeps us at par with the rest of the living organisms. Man evolved from 'first nature' and emerged as an intelligent and thinking being that is part of his 'second nature'. Second nature is a product of brain that can think in a richly conceptual manner and produce a highly symbolic form of communication. This second nature is uniquely different from first nature in that it can act and think wilfully as well as purposefully, depending on the society we are in. Finally, this second nature called society has its own history of evolution: its long process of grading out of first nature, of organizing or institutionalizing human relationships, human interactions, conflicts and distinctions, and its eminently creative and destructive potentialities. It's our second nature that yearned for the development of towns and cities, social institutions, science and technology. With increasing industrialization and capitalization, the width between rich and poor widened. The society had its divisions based on the have and have-nots. Social ecology locates the roots of the ecological crisis firmly in relations of the hierarchical organization of power and the authoritarian mentality rooted in the structures of our society. Murray Bookchin, in his *Ecology of Freedom* writes that in the framework of social ecology, "the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human".

Social ecologists argue that it is not just natural catastrophes that result in the most serious ecological dislocations of the 20th and 21st centuries; they have as their cause economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others. Present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within the human society. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, people are on a constant march of materialism, which means that acquisition, accumulation, possessions and consumption of material goods is the ultimate 'goal' of life. With the exacerbating development in modern capitalism, bourgeois society not only pits humans against each other, it also pits the mass of humanity against the natural world. Social ecology emphasises that the notion that man must dominate nature emerges in correspondence with the domination of man by man. Just as men are converted into commodities, every aspect of nature is converted into a commodity. Nature is taken for granted as a resource to be manufactured and merchandised wantonly. The plundering of the human spirit by the market place is paralleled by the plundering of the earth by capital. Social

ecologists believe that Social hierarchy and class divisions legitimize our domination of the environment and underpin the consumer system. The root causes of environmental problems are such as trade for profit, industrial expansion, and the identification of 'progress' with corporate self-interest.

In short, the social domination of women by men and of men by other men ultimately gives rise to the notion of dominating nature in the first place. Bookchin writes, "the idea of dominating nature has its primary source in the domination of human by human and the structuring of the natural world into a hierarchical Chain of Being" Man, the self-proclaimed superior being, has separated himself from nature. Owing to its inherently competitive nature he believes that he has mastered nature. Nature is to be used and to serve his own purpose. Ann Coulter, an American lawyer and Conservative political commentator once remarked:

'The ethic of conservation is the explicit abnegation of man's dominion over the Earth. The lower species are here for our use. God said so: Go forth, be fruitful, multiply, and rape the planet--it's yours'.

Nature is to be bound into service and made a 'slave and 'put in constraint.' In short, nature is to be conquered, not enjoyed and certainly not revered as an equal. Man and nature are treated as separate entities believing that the former has the prerogative to exploit the latter. Helen Ellerbe in 'The Dark Side of Christian History' writes that when the British scaled earth's highest peak, the exploit was widely hailed as the 'Conquest of the Everest'. It was not realized and is often not realized still, that the word "conquest" was totally out of place in the context of the peak which is considered an object of reverence by many. One does not "conquer" nature. Nature humors at times, man's curiosity. Conquest is, therefore, an irreverent word. Man's 'first nature' never considered Nature or Earth as a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. Man has proclaimed his uniqueness as a thinking and planning creature and has thus propagated and promoted his domination over the natural world and his unique capacity for cultural development and historical progress.

Social ecology emphasizes that the destiny of human life goes hand-in-hand with the destiny of the non-human world. Social ecologists believe that things like racism, sexism, third world exploitation are a product of the same mechanisms that cause rainforest devastation. Bookchin claims that most environmentalists focus on the symptoms of our problems rather than the causes, so mistakenly focus on technology or population growth. Unless we change society, 'soft' technologies won't make any difference either. Simple technology can still wreak environmental damage if the ideology that uses it is unchanged.

Social ecology's interpretation of planetary evolution and the realization of social and ecological possibilities are not merely as a mechanism of adaptation but as a holistic process. This evolution can only be understood by examining the interaction and mutual determination between species and species, between species and ecosystem, and between species, ecosystem and the earth as a whole.

Life on this planet is unity-in-diversity; our place in nature is internally related to more encompassing realms of being, to wider realms of being. By recognizing our many modes of relatedness, we can discover our social and ecological responsibility i.e. our capacity to respond to the needs of the human and natural communities in which we participate. Our relation to this primordial ground is both psychoanalytic and phenomenological. It reveals the ways in which we are ecological beings, and indeed spiritual beings, because our being extends beyond the limits of the ego or socially constructed selfhood. Thus, there are fundamental aspects of being that connect us, physically, psychologically and ontologically, with greater realities, with other living beings, with our species, with the earth, with the primordial ground of being.

To social ecology, nature is not the cosmic arrangement of beings frozen in a moment of eternity to be abjectly adored, revered, and worshiped like the gods and goddesses that priests and priestesses place above us in a realm of super-nature that subverts the naturalistic integrity of an authentic ecology. Nature is a part of natural evolution. It is composed of atoms, molecules that have evolved into amino acids, proteins, unicellular organisms, genetic codes, invertebrates and vertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, primates, and human beings - all in a cumulative thrust toward ever greater complexity and self-consciousness. Man, society, environment and spirituality cannot be separated. In fact social ecology was among the earliest of contemporary ecologies to call for a sweeping change in existing spiritual values. Social ecologists aim to replace our mentality of domination towards nature with 'ethics of complementarity'. Such ethics reflect our true role which is to create a fuller, richer world for all beings. This ethics of complementarity has a spiritual dimension that is sometimes described by social ecologists as the "respiritization of the natural world". The spirituality advanced by social ecology is definitively naturalistic rather than super-naturalistic or pantheistic.

To overcome the ideology of dominating nature, we need to create a society without hierarchical structures or economic classes. In place of the existing hierarchical and class system, social ecology proposes an egalitarian society based on mutual aid, caring and communitarian values. People in this new society would understand that the interests of the collective are inseparable from those of each individual. This process of eliminating all domination must begin: "not only in the factory but also in the family, not only in the economy but also in the psyche, not only in the material conditions of life but also in the spiritual ones."

Keeping the present scenario in mind, at times, social ecology looks like an impossible dream. But Social Ecology is avowedly rational. It is a coherent form of naturalism that looks to evolution and the biosphere and not to the deities in the sky or under the earth for quasi-religious and super-naturalistic explanations of natural and social phenomena. It investigates the ways in which we can encourage the emergence of humane, mutualistic, ecologically-responsible institutions in all areas of social life. It calls for the creation of a 'moral economy' as a precondition for a just ecological society. It sees all areas of social interaction, including production and consumption, personal relationships, family life, child-care, education, the arts, modes of communication, spiritual life, ritual and celebration, recreation and play, and informal modes of cooperation to

lead towards the emergence of 'a productive community' and to replace the amoral 'mere marketplace' that is currently prevailing.

The dominance as well as the importance of the economic in contemporary society cannot be negated. Social ecology must devote considerable attention to the means of creating a socially and ecologically responsible system of production and consumption. Bookchin has stressed the contribution that can be made by such alternatives as community credit unions, community supported agriculture, community gardens and community-owned enterprises. He emphasizes cooperatives and small individually-owned businesses. He suggests that the process could begin with the public purchase of unprofitable enterprises, the establishment of land trusts, and the support for small-scale productive enterprises. If we change human society then our relationship with the rest of nature will become transformed. This alternative society will be based on ecological principles; an organic unity in diversity, free of hierarchy & based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life.

Social ecology is at the present moment in a stage of rapid transformation, self-reflection, and expansion of its theoretical horizons. It is in the process of escaping from the dogmatic tendencies that have threatened its theoretical vitality and practical relevance. It is ready to withdraw from the 'contest of ecologies' and move forward in its theoretical development, in creative dialogue with other philosophies. It is now in a position to realize its potential as a holistic and dialectical philosophy that seeks greater openness and opportunity for growth. Working towards a more adequate synthesis of theoretical reflection and empirical inquiry, it has attained an increasingly comprehensive theoretical scope, and is striving for a truly dialectical relation to creative social practice. This project of social ecology will certainly gain momentum through the increasing awareness of global ecological crisis and deterioration of the ties of human community. Yet the movement will be stimulated and inspired most by its affirmative ecological faith i.e. its love for humanity in all its magnificent expressions, its wonder at the diverse manifestations of life on earth, and its awe at the mystery of being. It will also learn to accept human limitations and the tragic dimension of history, and put aside the illusions of shallow progressivism, revolutionary fantasy, and Promethean heroism. It will find hope rather in a vision of the human community that is freed from its quest for domination of self, of others, of objects, of nature. This society will realize its own good through participating in and contributing to the good of the larger community of life. In pursuing this vision, social ecology realizes its deepest meaning as a reflection on the earth household, a reflection that reveals our place as companions in our common journey.

### REFERENCES

1. Holmes Rolston; Environmental Ethics: Duties and Values in the Natural World (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988)
2. John Clark and Camille Martin, Liberty, Equality, Geography: The Social Thought of Elisée Reclus (Littleton, CO: Aigis Publications, 1996)

## 2 Days International Conference on Recent Innovations in Engineering, Science, Humanities and Management

Dev Samaj College for Women, Ferozepur, Panjab (India)

(ICRIESHM-17)

18th -19th March 2017, [www.conferenceworld.in](http://www.conferenceworld.in)

ISBN: 978-93-86171-33-7

3. John Clark ed. *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology* (London: Green Print, 1990)
4. Murray Bookchin; *The Philosophy of Social Ecology* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1990)
5. Murray Bookchin; *The Modern Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1986)
6. Ramachandra Guha; Lewis Mumford, the Forgotten American Environmentalist: An Essay in Rehabilitation' in David Macauley, ed. *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996)
7. S. Radhakrishnan; *An Idealist View of Life* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964), Ch. vi, 'Matter, Life and Mind'
8. Sri Aurobindo; *The Essential Aurobindo* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973) Tom Athanasiou, *Divided Planet: The Ecology of Rich and Poor* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996)
9. Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme; *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992)