

JOEL KOVEL

THE

ENEMY

OF

NATURE



THE END OF CAPITALISM OR
THE END OF THE WORLD?

THE ENEMY OF NATURE
The end of capitalism or the
end of the world?

Joel Kovel

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About this Book

The Enemy of Nature faces the harsh but increasingly inescapable conclusion that capitalism is the driving force behind the ecological crisis, and draws the radical implications. Joel Kovel – noted scholar and author, also public speaker and green campaigner – indicts capitalism, with its unrelenting pressure to expand, as both inherently ecodestructive and unreformable. He argues against the reigning orthodoxy that there can be no alternative to the capitalist system, not because this orthodoxy is weak, but because submission to it is suicidal as well as unworthy of human beings. Kovel sees capital as not just an economic system but as the present manifestation of an ancient rupture between humanity and nature. This widening of scope is given theoretical weight in the second part of the work, which develops a positive synthesis between marxism, ecofeminism and the philosophy of nature. Then Kovel turns to ‘what is to be done?’ He criticizes existing ecological politics for their evasion of capital, advances a vision of ecological production as the successor to capitalist production, and develops the principles for realizing this, as an ‘ecosocialism’, in the context of anti-globalization politics. He sees, prefigured in present struggle, the outlines of a society of freely associated producers for whom the earth is no longer an object to be owned and exploited, but the source of intrinsic value.

The Enemy of Nature is written in the spirit of the great radical motto, ‘be realistic – demand the impossible!’ Its author dares to think the unthinkable – we have a choice: capitalist barbarism and ecocatastrophe, or the building of a society worthy of humanity and nature.

About the Author

Joel Kovel has been Alger Hiss Professor of Social Studies at Bard College, in Annandale, New York since 1988. He was awarded a Fellowship at the John Guggenheim Foundation in 1987. In 1998, Kovel was a New York candidate for the US Senate, and in 2000 he was a candidate for nomination for President of the United States, on both occasions representing the Green Party. He lectures widely and has appeared on radio and television broadcasts in the USA, Canada, the UK, South Africa and Australia. Since the 1960s, he has published numerous journal articles on topics related to psychoanalysis and psychiatry (his original area of study), as well as politics and ecology.

His recent books include:

- *Red Hunting in the Promised Land* (Second Edition, Cassell, London, 1997)
- *History and Spirit* (Second Edition, Essential Books, 1998)
- *In Nicaragua* (Free Association Books, London, 1988)
- *The Radical Spirit: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society* (Free Association Books, London, 1988)
- *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (Second Edition, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984).
- *The Age of Desire* (Second Edition, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981).

Preface

Growing numbers of people are beginning to realize that capitalism is the uncontrollable force driving our ecological crisis, only to become frozen in their tracks by the awesome implications of the insight. Considering that the very possibility of a future revolves around this notion, I decided to take it up in a comprehensive way, to see whether it is true, and if so, how it came about, and most importantly, what we can do about it.

Here is something of how this project began. Summers in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, where I live, are usually quite pleasant. But in 1988, a fierce drought blasted the region from mid-June until well into August. As the weeks went by and the vegetation baked and the wells went dry, I began to ponder something I had recently read, to the effect that rising concentrations of gases emitted by industrial activity would trap solar radiation in the atmosphere and lead to ever-growing climatic destabilization. Although the idea had seemed remote at first, the ruin of my garden brought it alarmingly close to home. Was the drought a fluke of the weather, or, as I was coming to think, was it a tolling bell, calling us to task for a civilization gone wrong? The seared vegetation now appeared a harbinger of something quite dreadful, and a call to action. And so I set out on the path that led to this book. Thirteen years later, after much writing, teaching and organizing, after working with the Greens and running for the US Senate in 1998 and seeking their presidential nomination in 2000, and after several drafts and false starts, *The Enemy of Nature* is ready to be placed before the public.

It would have been understandable to shrug off the drought as just another piece of odd weather (and, indeed, nothing that severe has occurred since). But I had for some time been disposed to take a worst-case attitude with respect to anything having to do with the powers-that-be; and since industrial activity was close to the heart of the system, so were its effects on

climate drawn into the zone of my suspicion. US imperialism had got me going, initially in the context of Vietnam and later in Central America, where an agonizing struggle to defend the Nicaraguan revolution against Uncle Sam was coming to a bad end as the drought struck. The defeat had been bitter and undoubtedly contributed to my irritability, but it provided important lessons as well, chiefly as to the implacability displayed by the system once one looked below its claims of democracy and respect for human rights.

Here, far from the pieties, the effects of capital's ruthless pressure to expand are encountered. Imperialism was such a pattern, manifest politically and across nations. But this selfsame ever-expanding capital was also the superintendent and regulator of the industrial system whose exhalations were trapping solar energy. What had proved true about capital in relation to empire could be applied, therefore, to the realm of nature as well, bringing the human victims and the destabilizations of ecology under the same sign. Climate change was, in effect, another kind of imperialism. Nor was it the only noxious ecological effect of capital's relentless growth. There was also the sowing of the biosphere with organochlorines and other toxins subtle as well as crude, the wasting of the soil as a result of the Green Revolution, the prodigious species losses, the disintegration of Amazonia, and much more – spiralling, interpenetrating tentacles of a great crisis in the relationship between humanity and nature.

From this standpoint there appears a greater 'ecological crisis', of which the particular insults to ecosystems are elements. This has further implications. For human beings are part of nature, however ill at ease we may be with the role. There is therefore a human ecology as well as an ecology of forests and lakes. It follows that the larger ecological crisis would be generated by, and extend deeply into, an ecologically pathological society. Regarding the matter from this angle provided a more generous view. No longer trapped in a narrow economic determinism, one could see capital not only as a material arrangement, but more deeply, as a pathological way of being cancerously lodged in the human spirit. And if it is a whole way of being that needs changing, then the essential question 'what is to be done?' takes on new dimensions. Ecological politics becomes much more than managing the external environment. It takes on, rather, a frankly revolutionary aspect. And since the revolution is against the capital that is nature's enemy, the struggle for an ecologically just and rational society

will be the logical successor to the socialism that agitated the last century and a half before sputtering to an ignominious end. The great question now becomes whether this 'next-epoch', ecological socialism could overcome the flaws that haunted and brought down the original version.

A big problem hanging over these ideas is that very few people take them seriously. I have been acutely aware from the beginning of this project that the above theses are at a great distance from so-called mainstream opinion. How could it be otherwise in a time of capitalist triumph, when by definition reasonable folk are led to think that just a bit of tinkering with market mechanisms will see us through our ecological difficulties? And as for socialism, why should anyone with an up-to-date mind bother thinking about such a quaint issue, much less trying to overcome its false starts?

These difficulties extend over to the fragmented and divided left side of opinion, whether this be the 'red' left that inherits the old socialist passion for the working class, or the 'green' left that stands for an emerging awareness of the ecological crisis. Socialism, though ready to entertain the idea that capital is nature's enemy, is less sure about being nature's friend. It needs to be said that most socialists, though they stand for a cleaner environment, decline to take the ecological dimension seriously. They support a strategy where the worker's state will clean up pollution, but are unwilling to follow the radical changes that an ecological point of view implies as to the character of human needs, the fate of industry, and the question of nature's intrinsic value. Meanwhile, Greens, however dedicated they may be to rethinking the latter questions, resist placing capital at the centre of the problem. Green politics tend to be populist or anarchist rather than socialist, hence Greens envision an ecologically sane future in which a suitably regulated capitalism, brought down to size and mixed with other forms, continues to regulate social production. Such was essentially the stance of Ralph Nader, whom I challenged in the 2000 presidential primary, with neither intention nor hope of winning, but only to keep the message alive that the root of the problem lies in capital itself.

We live at a time when those who think in terms of alternatives to the dominant order risk exclusion from polite intellectual society. During my youth, and for generations before, a consensus existed that capitalism was embattled and that its survival was an open question. For the last twenty years or so, however, with the rise of neoliberalism and the collapse of the

Soviets, the system has acquired an aura of inevitability and even immortality. It is quite remarkable to see how readily the intellectual classes go along, sheeplike, with these absurd conclusions, disregarding the well-established lessons that nothing lasts for ever, that all empires fall, and that a twenty-year ascendancy is scarcely a blink in the flux of time. But the same mentality that went into the recently deceased dot.com mania applies to those who see capitalism as a gift from the gods, destined for immortality. One would think that a moment of doubt would be introduced into the official scenario by the screamingly obvious fact that a society predicated on endless expansion must inevitably collapse its natural base. However, thanks to a superbly effective propaganda apparatus and the intellectual defects wrought by power, such has not so far been the case.

Change, if it comes, will have to come from outside the ruling consensus. And there is evidence that just such an awakening may be taking place. Cracks have been appearing in the globalized edifice through which a new era of protest is emerging. When the World Trade Organization is forced to hold its meeting in Qatar in order to avoid disruption, or fence itself in inside the walled city of Quebec, or when the president-select, George W. Bush, is forced by protestors at his inauguration to slink fugitive-like along Pennsylvania Avenue in a sealed limousine, then it may fairly be said that a new spirit is in the air, and that the generation now maturing, thrown through no choice of their own into a world defined by the ecological crisis, are also beginning to rise up and take history into their own hands. *The Enemy of Nature* is written for them, and for all those who are beginning to recognize the need to break with the given in order to win a future.

An attitude of dissension conditioned me to see the 1988 drought as a harbinger of an ecologically ruined society. But that was not all I brought to the task. I was also working at the time on my *History and Spirit*, having been stirred by the faith of the Sandinistas, and especially their radical priests, to realize that a refusal is worthless unless coupled with affirmation, and that it takes a notion of the whole of things to gather courage to reach beyond the given. There is a wonderful saying from 1968, which should guide us in the troubled time ahead: to be realistic, one demands the impossible. So let us rise up and do so.

Many people helped me on the long journey to this book – too many, I fear, for them all to be included here, especially if one takes into account, as we

should, the many hundreds I met during the political campaigns that provide much of its background. But there is no difficulty in identifying its chief intellectual influence. Soon after I decided to confront the ecological crisis, I decided also to link up with James O'Connor, founder of the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, and originator of the school of ecological Marxism that made the most sense to me. It proved one of the most felicitous moments of my career and led to a collaboration that is still active. As my mentor in matters political-economic and toughest critic, but mostly as a dear friend, Jim's presence is everywhere in this volume (although the disclaimer must be underscored that its errors are mine alone). I have been indebted throughout to the *CNS* community for giving me an intellectual home and forum, and for countless instances of comradely help. This begins with Barbara Laurence, and includes the New York editorial group – Paul Bartlett, Paul Cooney, Maarten DeKadt, Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, Costas Panayotakis, Patty Parmalee, Jose Tapía and Edward Yuen – along with Daniel Faber and Victor Wallis, of the Boston group, and Alan Rudy.

A number of people have taken the trouble to give portions of the manuscript a close reading during various stages in its gestation – Susan Davis, Andy Fisher, DeeDee Halleck, Jonathan Kahn, Cambiz Khosravi, Andrew Nash, Walt Sheasby and Michelle Syverson – and to them all I am grateful. I am further grateful to Michelle Syverson for the active support she has given this project during its later stages.

Among those who have helped in one way or another at different points of the work, I thank Roy Morrison, John Clark, Doug Henwood, Harriet Fraad, Ariel Salleh, Brian Drolet, Leo Panitch, Bertell Ollman, Fiona Salmon, Finley Schaefer, Don Boring, Starlene Rankin, Ed Herman, Joán Martínez-Alier, Daniel Berthold-Bond and Nadja Milner-Larson. Mildred Marmur provided, once again, stalwart support and practical guidance through that sector of the real world that will always baffle me. And to Robert Molteno and the people at Zed, thanks for the help and the opportunity to join the honourable list of works they have shepherded into existence.

I would also take the opportunity to give thanks to Bard College, my academic home since 1988, and to its administration, especially Leon Botstein and Stuart Levine, as well as its faculty, staff (in particular, Jane Dougall), and students, for all the support – material, intellectual and spiritual – over the years. In a time of declining tolerance for dissident

views, it was an extraordinary piece of luck for me to find Bard, and this project would have been far lonelier and more arduous without it.

Last and as ever, not least, except in the ages of its younger members, I thank the family that sustains me. This begins with my wife and soulmate, DeeDee, and extends to those who represent the children of the future for whom the battle must be fought: Solmaria, Rowan, Liam, Tolan and Owen.

November 2001

The grim shadow over our future cast on September 11, 2001 occurred between the composition of *The Enemy of Nature* and its release, and could not be incorporated into its argument. Yet its significance is such as to call for some brief observations.

First, because much of this book was written during a period of rampant economic growth, its main theme, that of the relentless expansive pressure of capital, might seem less important given the current brutal downturn of the world economic system. However, the same basic principles hold. For the pressure itself is what counts, whether or not it succeeds in imposing growth. Capital is a crisis-ridden system, and although there is never any clean correlation between crises in the economy and those of ecology, the integrity of ecosystems is sacrificed at either end of the economic cycle. When the economy grows, sheer quantity becomes the dominating factor; while when, as now, it heads downwards, the diminution in growth acts as a signal causing environmental safeguards to be loosened in order to restore accumulation.

Second, the crisis posed by fundamentalist terror and that posed by global ecological decay share certain basic features. As we will see in the following pages, the ecological crisis is like a nightmare in which the demons released in the progressive domination of nature on a world scale come back to haunt the master. But something of the same holds for terrorism. Fundamentalism's rebellion is often seen as being against modernity, but this only begins to matter in the context of imperialism, that is, the progressive domination of *humanity* on a world scale. In the species of imperialism known as globalization, the dissolution of all the old ways of being is part and parcel of forcibly imposed 'free trade'. Fundamentalisms arise within disintegrating peripheral societies as ways of restoring the integrity of ravaged communities. The project becomes irrational because of the hatred

induced by powerlessness, and as it does, turns towards a pattern of terror and counter-terror in a cycle of vengeance.

The dialectics of terror and ecological disintegration are joined in the regime of oil. This constitutes, on the one hand, the chief material dynamic of the ecological crisis, and on the other, the organizing principle for imperial domination of those lands where the conflict is being fought out. Petroleum fuels industrial society, and the growth of the West is necessarily a growth in the exploitation and control of those lands where it is most strategically located. As these happen to be largely Islamic, so is the stage set for the great struggle now unfolding.

This is not the place to take up the conduct of this struggle except to say that it needs to be joined at the root of its causes. From this perspective, resolving the ecological crisis and freeing humanity from terror – including, to be sure, the terror inflicted by the superpower on its victims – are two aspects of the same process. Both require the overcoming of empire, which requires the undoing of what generates imperialism over nature and humanity. It is an illusion to think that this can be achieved without a profound restructuring of our industrial system, and, by implication, our whole way of being. The grip of imperialism, whether of oil or otherwise, cannot be broken within the terms of the current order. Hence what is required to overcome global warming and the other aspects of the ecological crisis also goes for terror. A world must be built that does not *need* the fossil fuel economy, a world, as is argued in what follows, beyond capital.

For everything that lives is Holy *William Blake*

All that is holy is profaned *Karl Marx*

To my grandchildren: Owen, Tolan, Liam,
Rowan and Solmaria

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Part I
The Culprit

