

PIED 3510 Global Political Theory and The
Environment

Question 6) For ecosocialists, what is the role of
the State in relation to market forces and
ecological sustainability?

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Q6) For ecosocialists, what is the role of the State in relation to market forces and ecological sustainability?

Ecosocialism is heavily indebted to Karl Marx's work; however, in contrast to the well known preceding interpretations of Marx (such as Soviet Russia), ecosocialists have put ecological considerations at the centre of their economic, political and social structural analysis. Furthermore, whilst there a variety of socialist/ecosocialist theories, most ecosocialists advocate a decentralised, diversified form of state, contra to the modern/liberal state. Ecosocialists have a common distrust of the market, with most desiring nuanced market forces alongside new forms of governance – however, the essay will purport that Eckersley's (1992) criticism of Gorz's (1982) 'dual economy', that it is difficult to determine the role of the market in Gorz's theory, is true for many ecosocialist analyses. To illustrate these points, the essay will begin with a contextual outline, specifically addressing the question of whether ecosocialism is anthropocentric or ecocentric. There will be a discussion of what ecological sustainability means, with reference to the World Commission on Environment and Development's (WCED) (1987) famous conception of sustainable development. There will be consideration of the strong influence Marx has had upon ecosocialism, especially in relation to their critique of market forces. The varying ecosocialist conceptions of the state and the market will be critically assessed in reference to other important social, economic and political issues that have clear ecological consequences. Finally, there will be a critical analysis of Green Market Economy and its influence upon some ecosocialists' views regarding the market's ability to achieve ecological sustainability.

To assess ecosocialism's ecological credentials, Eckersley's (1992) definition of ecocentric and anthropocentric approaches is useful. Anthropocentric perspectives

are notorious for believing that humans 'naturally' dominant nature, whereas ecocentrism looks at the interrelationship between the human and non-human world and how, ethically, there is no dividing line between these two worlds. Whilst ecosocialism has strong ecological tendencies, it places social justice ahead of ecological justice (Pepper 1993). However, this does not mean we should disregard ecosocialism, especially considering many ecosocialists' concentration upon decentralised structures that can challenge the often ecologically damaging neoliberal constructions of localism that are on the rise (Albo 2007).

To critically assess the role ecosocialists assign to the state in relation to the market and ecological sustainability, it is important to define the latter. For this, an understanding of the concept sustainable development is vital, as it is analogous to ecological sustainability. Whilst it importantly ties the environment to socio-economic issues, the WCED's (1987) fluid definition is interpreted differently to match a variety of means and ends (Hopwood *et al* 2005). The WCED defines sustainable development as meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (p.43). WCED's sustainable development has parallels with ecosocialism, as they both have a strong focus upon social justice (whilst not talking about ecosocialism *per se*, see Dobson (1998)). However, contra to ecosocialists critical conception of capitalist growth, WCED only purports to weakly modify current growth (Hopwood *et al* 2005).

Hopwood *et al* (2005) map three main interpretations of sustainable development. Status quo interpretations do not believe the social/power relations need alteration, as growth is *the* solution. Reformists, criticise existing structures and governmental practices, but fall short of advocating for radical restructuring. Finally, transformationists do purport radical praxis and many advocate ecocentric goals,

resulting in some transformationists dropping the concept sustainable development altogether due to its anthropocentric connotations. It is best to see ecosocialists predominantly in-between being reformists and transformationists whereas, WCED is located in-between status quo and reformism.

Ecosocialists conception of ecological sustainability extensively adapts Marxian theorising. Eckersley (1992) is very hostile to Marxist analysis for ecological ventures, as she criticises Marx for purporting a communist system that would humanise and control nature through technology. However, as Burkett's (1997) analysis shows, Eckersley is too dismissive of Marx's value for ecological analyses. Marx argues that communism will see social relations change, seeing an end to mass production and an increase of free time - allowing for reduced and more sustainable production. Free time also helps develop intellectual abilities, which could see ecological thought expand. Eckersley is right, however, to classify ecosocialists as post-Marxist, as they are much more critical of Marx's emphasis upon productive forces (see Wall (2010); Mellor (2006)).

The role ecosocialists give the state in relation to market forces in achieving ecological sustainability strongly reflects their Marxian contour (Mellor 2006). Gorz (1980), whilst stating his objection to Marx's focus on the forces of production, utilises Marx to discuss capitalist/market crises. There is the crisis of 'over accumulation', where in order to maintain production levels, capitalists replace workers with machines - increasing capital at the expense of profit - eventually resulting in an economic crisis. Secondly, there is the crisis of reproduction, where prices often go up before there are physical signs of scarcity. However, this creates tendencies towards the falling rate of profit, as the capitalists need to start recycling

or indulging in big money investments to find new natural 'resources' to exploit for profit.

Regardless of future visions/hopes, many ecosocialists envisage a limited private sector where small businesses are closely monitored in terms of size and profit (Eckersley 1992). Thus, an ecosocialism economy/market would be focused upon fostering decentralised and commonly owned ecologically sustained units such as community enterprises, with the state as a mediator (Eckersley 1992; Mellor 2006).

However, whilst ecosocialists advance the need for a state, most ecosocialist conceptions of the state conceive governance as contra to what we conventionally define the state in modern capitalist systems. Often, this, in all but name, shows parallels to the work of ecoanarchists such as Murray Bookchin (especially Bookchin's later work regarding communalism). Consider Kovel's (2007) emphasis upon freely associated labour and the need to reclaim the commons so that it is orientated towards ecocentric ends. Kovel talks about a new form of state, with self-regulated, decentralised communities/commons that people control and through these interdependent relations develop their self via creativity. Whilst ecoanarchists pay considerably more attention to the problems of hierarchy, there are ecosocialist conceptions of the state (or state like forms) being advocated to undermine the hierarchical effects upon the environment (see Slaughter (2005) for example, or Pepper (1986), who advocates an anarchist-socialist system, contra to a centralised-socialist system).

However, there are some conceptions of ecosocialism as bureaucratic in nature, such as Dryzek's (2005) likening of ecosocialism to administrative rationalism - where there is an emphasis on hierarchal organising, with technical/scientific expert

advice privileged above citizen participation. There are also many reformist conceptions of the state by ecosocialists. For example, Meadowcroft (2005) asserts that through an analysis of the UK welfare state, we can expect an ecological state to steadily (not radically) emerge around 2020. Other ecosocialist reformists would be Pepper *et al* (1984), who argue that through anti-capitalist educational consciousness-raising, people can challenge the social, political and economic relations, fostering the development of an ecosocialist society.

Central to most ecosocialist conceptions of the state, and its role in achieving ecological sustainability, is localism framed within a global context. Consider Kovel's (2007) support of local currencies but also the importance he places upon international relationships developing across the commons/communities. Similarly, Mellor (2006) argues that without a global configuration there is the danger a postcode lottery could form. Furthermore, in light of Venezuelan attempts to form a Fifth International (ng Masa 2010), ecosocialism should consider working towards a Sixth International or helping construct the Fifth (manifestos to help: Kovel and Lowy (2001) and The Belem Ecosocialist Declaration (2009)).

Self-development is often central to ecosocialist theories. For example, Gorz's (1982) 'dual economy' constructs two separate spheres: the sphere of heteronomy (state– productive processes) and the sphere of autonomy (civil society – where creative freedom is developed). Without the separation, individual's autonomy would be undermined, illustrating the state's importance. Again, however, the conception of the state is vastly different from the modern liberal conception, with a focus upon decentralised, diverse, ecologically sustainable array of social/political units.

Regardless, many argue that the fusion of decentralisation and central planning is inconsistent (Whiteside 1997) and that Gorz's dual economy could result in important

decisions reached outside the public sphere (Eckersley 1992). Bookchin has criticised Gorz for having a 'magical' technological/bureaucratic 'solution', which fails to challenge capitalist mentality (Pepper *et al* 1984). Furthermore, whilst the state's role is clear, Gorz fails to adequately define the role of the market (Eckersley 1992). This inability is a valid criticism of many ecosocialists, often due to their preoccupation with critically assessing the capitalist market (discussed above).

Whiteside (1997) refers to how Gorz's earlier focus upon utopian ecosocialist thinking has shifted to contracted ecosocialism, where there is a more complex view of the various interests (trade unions, for example) that would influence the ecosocialist state and market. Whiteside also argues that contractual ecosocialism is important for managing the conflicts between centralisation and decentralisation. However, Eckersley (1992) talks about the benefits ecological utopias can have with helping the public envisage alternative realities. Nevertheless, Pepper *et al*'s (1984) warnings that 'ecotopias' could fall victim to ecofacism should be taken seriously.

How will these new orientations of the state to the market and ecological sustainability occur? Many ecosocialists have moved away from traditional Marxian revolutionary class analysis (Eckersley 1992). For example, Gorz (1982) refers to the disappearing proletariat through technological advancement, with revolutionary strategies now about freeing oneself from work, instead of within work. To do this, he refers to the formation of a non-class/non-workers forming, as work/class becomes fluid/insecure. Conversely, Pepper *et al* (1984) criticise ecosocialists for undermining the class struggle, with Pepper (1986) referring to how the labour movement, green movement and Labour party need a more intense interrelationship with ecosocialism as the fibre. Thus, Pepper believes that waiting around for a revolution is idealistic,

and that we should utilise the existing state and market to achieve ecological sustainability.

Whilst Eckersley's (1992) multi-decision state shares similarities with ecosocialism, she argues that a Green Market Economy may be better than an ecosocialist society. This would see macro-economic controls, shaped with ecological consideration, 'ecologize' the market through reformed state regulation and a promotion of diverse market structures (such as small businesses and local economics). Thus, in contrast to most ecosocialist theories, the private sector would be much larger when attempting to achieve ecological sustainability. However, there are problems, including the markets limitations in redistribution and its ability to adapt to new controls (Eckersley (1992); Albo (2007) who talks about the problems green markets would have if they are not international).

Pearce *et al's* (1989) work is a good example of a Green Market Economy approach. With their support for the WCED (1987) definition of sustainable development, they want certain market mechanistic changes to ensure sustainable development, including a change in the price of goods. This would include factoring the costs of production, through measures such as pollution taxes, associated with natural resources themselves to reflect the 'true' price of the product.

Some ecosocialists have utilised Green Market Economy theory, and unlike many ecosocialists, have a clear role for the market in relation to the state and in achieving ecological sustainability. Fitzpatrick and Caldwell (2001) argue that an alternative to market capitalism is green social democratic capitalism, which would move us closer to ecosocialism. They advocate an 'ecosocial welfare' where 'radical reformism' ensures an idealistic vision whilst working pragmatically within the existing system.

An expression of this is Local Exchange Trading Systems, where non-profit exchange is encouraged within local areas, which is separate from the market and the state, i.e. “fifth sector”. Whilst there are similarities between ecological limits and ‘natural laws’ of the market (Gorz 1980), most ecosocialists do not have a deterministic stance towards ecological sustainability, instead advocating a social constructionist approach (Mellor 2006).

In conclusion, the essay has illustrated the diversity amongst the ecosocialists in regards to the role they attribute to the state in relation to the market and ecological sustainability. Ecosocialist conceptions of the state vary from being close to ecoanarchism, to being more reformist, with a few holding bureaucratic viewpoints. There is a diversity of ecosocialist positions regarding the state’s relationship with the market, with many ecosocialists too preoccupied with criticising the capitalist market to specify the exact role of the market in a future ecosocialist system.

Regardless, many ecosocialists want a limited, regulated and radically reformed private sector, whereas some who are close to the Green Market Economists want regulation of the existing free market system. As the sustainable development discussion illustrated, the concept, like ecological sustainability, suffers from an array of interpretations. Thus, whilst most of the ecosocialists discussed advocate a decentralised, diverse and democratic relation between the state/state forms and ecological sustainability, this is not true for all ecosocialists. Ecosocialists however, do tend to have an anthropocentric perspective towards ecological sustainability, where social justice takes precedence over ecological justice. Many within the green movement distance themselves from ecosocialism because of its reliance upon Marxian analysis; but this ignores the incredible development ecosocialist thought has undergone, as well as misrepresenting much of what Marx said. Regardless,

ecosocialism is a vital theoretical framework to utilise when understanding the plurality of roles and definitions the state, market and ecological sustainability can have within a possible ecocentric society.

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