

## Deep Social Ecology

Jason Wirth

Volume 37, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088469ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088469ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

1705-9429 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Wirth, J. (2021). Deep Social Ecology. *The Trumpeter*, 37(1), 2–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1088469ar>

Copyright (c) Jason Wirth, 2021



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

# Deep Social Ecology

---

*Jason Wirth*

## Introduction

Deep ecology is a call to ground the relationship of our politics, economics, and lifeways in the ecologies that sustain them. It is the cultivation of ecosophy: wisdom grounded in, and taking responsibility for, what it is to be sustained by a place. The renowned “anarchist” social ecologist Murray Bookchin shared deep ecology's sense that our political economy should be reconciled with our ecology, but he polemicized against deep ecology's account of that relationship. Although Bookchin has much to offer deep ecology, I argue that we cannot afford to think the two approaches as an exclusive disjunction. Reviewing in a contemporary context the enduring importance of deep ecology and then considering Bookchin's polemic against it, I argue that, while Bookchin badly overdetermines his case against deep ecology, and gratuitously makes an enemy out of what could have been an ally, some of his concerns have merit. Not wanting to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water and seeking to retain the invaluable impetus of deep ecology, I argue for a hybrid model, rooted in the cultivation of wisdom, that I call *deep social ecology*.

In the first section I reconstruct some features of ecosophy that are not restricted to the letter (but certainly appreciative of the spirit) of Arne Naess' two seminal grounding principles (the Self and biotic equality). By reconsidering the work of E. F. Schumacher, I call attention to the problems with assuming that the current practices of global capitalism are capable of an ecosophical turn. A system whose runaway success is grounded in the illusion that *more is never enough* is antithetical to the cultivation of ecosophy as a place-based sense of *less is more*. In the second section, I examine Bookchin's unfortunate polemic against deep ecology and then in the conclusion argue that the two approaches, rather than forming an exclusive disjunction, strengthen each other.

## 1.

The economist E. F. Schumacher, in his 1973 classic, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, called capitalism's bluff. Its frenzied devotion to growth, willy-nilly, has not solved the problem of production. Since the opening chapters of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the division of labor, with its increased dexterity from specialization, the efficient use of

time that comes with specialization, and machines that “abridge labor,”<sup>1</sup> contributes to the illusion that we can create wealth at an unprecedented rate in perpetuity, or what Schumacher called “the illusion of unlimited powers.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Smith was not in a position to grasp fully the explosive acceleration that the burning of fossil fuels would enable, even the increased productivity that early industrialization fostered is oblivious to what Schumacher called “natural capital.” *Wealth that produces wealth is not the only wealth that humans have produced.* To think so is a deep estrangement, but not in the Marxist sense in which labor is alienated from its time—the proletariat works to live and lives to work. It is rather a spatial alienation, the deracination of our relationship to our enabling ecological conditions such that “we are estranged from reality and inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves,”<sup>3</sup> a mistake inherent in Marx’s reduction of value to labor.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, without our enabling ecological conditions, not only are there no “primary goods” from which to produce secondary goods and services, there would be no people to consume or otherwise enjoy them.

The implications of designating the earth as natural capital are subversive. By calling nature “capital,” we are not simply calling for it to be priced. Natural capital is the necessary condition for economic capital, yet the latter deludes itself about its relationship to the former. If capital is wealth that is capable of generating additional wealth, natural capital is the wealth of the earth whose myriad possibilities include the social production of the very notion of capital as economic. Although natural capital is the ground of social (economic) capital, the latter is a relationship that in itself is not social and has nothing to do with markets, pricing, investments, and production. That the earth is a wealth of raw materials for human production is itself a social idea, not a natural one. Not only is social capital oblivious to natural capital, but its current practices also impoverish the latter. It is already an impoverishment to reduce natural capital to the social practice of capital. The former is the ground of the latter, but its wealth exceeds the restrictions of economic wealth. In the current practice of capitalism, the reduction of natural capital to social capital not only allows the earth to be depleted, but it also eradicates any sense of the wisdom that regards natural capital not as a business opportunity, but as a sacred gift and responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Books I-III* (London: Penguin, 1999), 112.

<sup>2</sup> E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Since Schumacher’s coinage of the term in 1973, the idea of “natural capital” has gained significant traction. The System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA), affiliated with the United Nations, now couples economic

In mainstream economic practice there is no hard foundational distinction between primary goods (natural capital), some of which are renewable and some of which are not, and secondary goods and services, all of which derive from the gift of natural capital. This systemic distortion allows us to spend down our natural capital as if it were income. Once natural capital is exhausted, however, the indomitable forces of production will come screeching to a halt and human life itself, profiting also from the natural capital of clean air and water, fertile soils, a climate favorable to human flourishing, deluded that it could produce wealth endlessly, impoverishes itself to the point of eventual self-extinction. Clearly Smith was wrong in declaring that we had solved the problem of production.

Smith was horrified by the “vile maxim” that the “masters of mankind” would take everything for themselves and leave nothing for the rest. He consequently argued that our better moral sentiments could regulate the excesses of productivity. He also thought that commerce, despite the inherent threat of the “vile maxim,” should be credited with diminishing the power of the great feudal landlords. As is well known, however, this ethical governance was not required to motivate participation in the acceleration of production. Fifteen years later, Kant would link self-love to our radical propensity for evil,<sup>6</sup> but Smith avoids these kinds of worries. For Smith, self-love is the base motivation for production: “It is not from benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens.”<sup>7</sup>

When Marx and Engels later characterized capitalist productivity in the first chapter of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) as the “sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells,”<sup>8</sup> it drives home Smith’s naïveté in imagining that we could bring the forces of capital under ethical governance. What motivates participation in capitalism unleashes a nether world that it cannot regulate. It is now easier to

---

statistics with environmental statistics. For more a more contemporary analysis of natural capital, see, for example, Dieter Helm, *Natural Capital: Valuing Our Planet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> For Kant, perversity (*Verkehrtheit*) follows from “the motivating force of self-love and its inclination towards the condition of compliance to the moral law.” Rather than making self-love subordinate to the moral law, the moral law becomes subordinated to self-love. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, from Ernst Cassirer’s edition of Kant’s *Werke*, volume 6 (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1923), 176, translation my own. The problem of self-love is also at the heart of Schelling’s 1809 *Freedom* essay, although it is also fair to say that it is one of the perennial spiritual problems throughout the world’s many wisdom traditions.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. (1848; reis., New York: Penguin, 2006), 10.

imagine the end of the world due to the prevailing ecological crises than it is to image an alternative to capitalism. This is in part due to the stubborn grip of ideology. Yet as Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) demonstrated, capital is concentrating into ever larger amounts for ever fewer people and its transnational distribution exceeds the capacity for national regulation. The more capital you have, the more capital you can earn and hence power concentrates in the portfolios of the increasingly powerful. Can we really expect our tepid international regulations to reign in the transnational power of the upper centile of the upper centile?

Maybe it is possible to develop new and more effective transnational regulatory institutions that could curb this dynamic with a global wealth tax—Piketty thinks that it is, in principle—but from an ecological perspective, the clock is ticking on such a massive project. Although as bad as it was when Schumacher died four years after the appearance of this book, the situation has grown far worse. Schumacher would likely have expected as much. *We will not solve these problems by continuously addressing the symptoms.* We must also attend to the root. The modern global economy is fundamentally a “frenzy of greed and indulges in an orgy of envy, and these are not accidental features but the very causes of its expansionist success.”<sup>9</sup> Self-love, given the opportunity, is ready to mature into the vile maxim. It is inherently insatiable, and more is never enough, much like the Buddha Dharma<sup>10</sup> lore of the hungry ghosts (the *preta*), who, the more they eat, the hungrier they become. Schumacher's attestation of this is easily evident in the country (the US) where I am writing this: “If greed were not the master of modern man—ably assisted by envy—how could it be that the frenzy of economism does not abate as higher ‘standards of living’ are attained, and that it is precisely the richest societies which pursue their economic advantage with the greatest ruthlessness?”<sup>11</sup> Growth is a purely quantitative affair, the more the better. A runaway economy is ideal.

Schumacher responded to this with some qualitative distinctions. Toward what ends do we want to grow? How much would be enough? What do we want from our economy and how do we propose to hold it accountable? Given that all growth is ultimately contingent upon natural capital, how do we plan to build our capital, rather than self-destructively spend it down as if the movements of our bioregions followed the initiatives of Wall Street? If the vile maxim of the latter is *more is never enough*, Schumacher's “Buddhist” economics are the inverse: *less is more*. In calling such economics “Buddhist,” Schumacher was not requiring that one adopt

---

<sup>9</sup> Schumacher, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Since “Buddhist” and “Buddhism” are late arriving European labels, where possible I speak rather of Buddha Dharma or the Buddha Way.

<sup>11</sup> Schumacher, 38.

Buddha Dharma beliefs or practices, or, if one were already religious, that one abandon that path for the Buddha Way. Rather, Buddhist economics is, as many of the Old Ways all over the world counselled, to break through self-love, first and foremost, by not extolling this vice as a virtue. For a practitioner of the Buddha Way, this is the problem of the three poisons (Skt. *triviṣa*) or unwholesome roots, namely, greedy attachment, anger and aggression against what threatens or blocks our attachments, and, underlying them both, ignorance or delusion, *moha* or *avidyā*. Wisdom is the awakening to the toxic delusion of our default mode of thinking and wanting. For Schumacher, wisdom “can be read about in numerous publications but it can be *found* only inside oneself. To be able to find it, one has first to liberate oneself from such masters as greed and envy.”<sup>12</sup> Without such wisdom, humans are “driven to build up a monster economy, which destroys the world.”<sup>13</sup>

The choice of the Buddha Way for Schumacher, however, is purely “incidental”<sup>14</sup> for such teachings are available within most all of the world’s spiritual traditions. But without the cultivation of wisdom, nothing is sacred, value is transactional, and natural capital is not intrinsically valuable. John Muir, for example, fought for the latter, but the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service were often pitched in economic terms. Even our notion of wilderness is itself the result of legislation, not philosophical assessment.

Yet without wisdom, we seem destined to self-extinction in the folly of our own hyperbolic productivity. That our models of political economy are unmoored, alienated from natural capital and, as such, unsustainable, is the opening into deep ecology. The latter is rooted in a “spiritual” practice, for want of a better word, the cultivation of a wisdom aligned with the wealth of the earth. It is important to note, however, that by “spiritual” we do not necessarily mean that we are imputing an extra spiritual dimension to our bioregions or that we need something magically extra-rational. There is “no extra mist,” as the 13th Century Zen Master Eihei Dōgen insisted, just things as they are. In so doing, we are not excluding religious traditions (e.g., the traditional Peoples of the Book) whose ontologies are rooted in a spiritual dimension, but such a commitment is not required. Wisdom is the prerequisite, that is, a commitment to respecting the intrinsic value of the earth and to enhancing its flourishing and abiding by its limits.

In considering the earth sacred, one is opposing materialism and consumerism, but not in the sense that one denigrates matter as metaphysically inferior to spirit.<sup>15</sup> It is rather to oppose

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>15</sup> This critical reading of matter for deep ecology is now well established. See, for example, Freya Mathews, *For*

*normative* materialism, that is, the relegation of our bioregions to raw materials for production and consumption. In a sense, deep ecology has its inadvertent philosophical roots in the various works of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, which railed not against science, but for the dignity of science in an age of encroaching positivism. In his famous 1809 essay on *Human Freedom*, for example, Schelling accused the modern philosophical tradition of Nature-cide because "Nature is not present to it" since it "lacks a living ground."<sup>16</sup> Normative materialism is nature-cide in the simple sense that it sees nature as stuff for the taking with which we can dispose of as we please.

Locke's famous justification for private property in the *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690) argues that "the labor of his body, and the work of his hands... are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labor with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property" (section 27). Locke did not mean that we should hoard or be wasteful or take a share so large that there is nothing left for others, or that labor can take the private property of others. Nonetheless, even if the land is kept in common by community decree, labor translates the natural world into a world at human disposal. This is what "Buddhist" economics and deep ecology contest: natural capital may be our shared wealth, but it is not simply at our disposal. We do not have the right to appropriate it wholesale, but we do have the responsibility to maintain and enhance it. Glen Sean Coulthard, in his profound study, *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), argues that the dispossession of Indigenous lands by settler colonial states did not appropriate the land with their labor but rather engaged in what Marx called "primitive accumulation," the violent wealth grab where the few take possession of the means of wealth production. In our present sense this would include the denigration of the sacredness of natural capital to private or state property. This is the loss of a sense of natural capital as what Coulthard, speaking for Indigenous lifeways, called "grounded normativity" that was "deeply informed by what the land as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms."<sup>17</sup>

---

*Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*, third revised edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) and Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände* (1809), in *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart-Augsburg: J. G. Cotta, 1856-1861). Division I, volume 7, 361. Translation my own.

<sup>17</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 13.

The “deep” in deep ecology, so to speak, minimally means the *grounded normativity* of our rootedness in natural capital. The ground of our shared being—human and nonhuman—is also the *value* of our shared being. Advocating for an interspecies ethics, Holmes Rolston III argued for overturning the naturalistic fallacy: “Whatever ought to be in culture, this biological world that *is also ought to be*; we must argue from the natural to the moral.”<sup>18</sup> Deep ecology extends this to the whole earth. We do not own it. It owns us, and rather than insist on the natural right to property—what I am allowed to do with the earth—we can speak of our shared responsibility, a language, we note here, that resonates with many Indigenous lifeways. The latter have allowed Indigenous societies to be far more resilient and long-lived than the great empires, all of which have historically failed.

Arne Naess first coined the term deep ecology in 1973, pushing the science of ecology to ask deeper, or we could here say, *wiser*, questions that go “beyond the so-called factual scientific level to the level of self and Earth wisdom.”<sup>19</sup> Apropos of our present context, Naess gave a critical example of this: “ecology as a science does not ask what kind of a society would be the best for maintaining a particular ecosystem—that is considered a question for value theory, for politics, for ethics.”<sup>20</sup> Deep ecology asks precisely such questions and thereby extends the scientific study of ecology into the extra-scientific realm of wisdom. How can one study the ecology of a bioregion and determine, from the deeper perspective of wisdom, what economics and politics are appropriate for its natural capital, primary goods, and sense of value? In other words, wisdom takes the science of ecology and attempts to sort out its social and economic implications. Such implications allow ecology to ground and inform the social and economic practices that would preserve and enhance their underlying ecological enabling and sustaining conditions.

Naess famously, or infamously, specified two principles of this wisdom: self-realization, that is, understanding the self in the context of its larger ecological Self; and biocentric equality, that is, decentering the speciesism<sup>21</sup> of *anthropos* and granting that all lifeforms are intrinsically equally valuable. Although I will return to these two principles shortly, I want to insist from the outset that it is not necessary for deep ecology to live or die by this particular formulation. It is

---

<sup>18</sup> Holmes Rolston III, “Challenges in Environmental Ethics,” In *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4th ed., ed. Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver, and John Clark (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2005), 82.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2007), 65. It is worth noting here that this flatlining of all science to the “so-called factual” is not supported by all practices of science.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> This is the term coined by Richard Ryder and popularized by Peter Singer in his 1975 *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*.

enough to say that wisdom affirms the intrinsic worth of the earth and attempts to cultivate human behaviors that respect and cooperate with it.

Toward this end, I would like to cite two attempts at a deep or wisdom ecology, one more traditionally spiritual, and one that does not posit anything of a supernatural order. For the former, we can turn to the Jesuit Pope Francis's most recent two encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* as well as *Fratelli Tutti*. The first enjoins the world of wisdom seekers on a common ground, literally, the earth that endows and sustains us. He calls all people to an ecological conversion to this ground. In the latter encyclical, the call for an ecological *metanoia* is extended to the global economy:

Everything, then, depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles. Otherwise, political propaganda, the media and the shapers of public opinion will continue to promote an individualistic and uncritical culture subservient to unregulated economic interests and societal institutions at the service of those who already enjoy too much power. (*Fratelli Tutti*, paragraph 166)

It is also critical that Pope Francis locates this "change of heart" at the ground of wisdom, following the recent UNESCO document, in the lifeways of Indigenous peoples: "Indigenous peoples ... are not opposed to progress, yet theirs is a different notion of progress, often more humanistic than the modern culture of developed peoples. Theirs is not a culture meant to benefit the powerful, those driven to create for themselves a kind of earthly paradise" (paragraph 220).

Although lucid and careful analysis is a necessary condition for understanding the critical nexus between ecology and political economy, it is insufficient if it lacks wisdom. Moreover, from Pope Francis' as well as a Buddha Dharma perspective, ecological conversion and the cultivation of wisdom are inseparable from wisdom's expression as compassion, kindness, and generosity.

This is evident in the great experiment of the Gross National Happiness in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Rather than quantitative measures of growth (e.g., the Gross Domestic Product), Bhutan attempts to intertwine material growth with spiritual growth. Happiness is not the passing delight of good fortune or the pleasure in getting whatever one wants. Going back to its medieval Bhutanese roots, "the main mechanism for sustaining the happiness of the people ... was to maintain a Buddhist outlook on life."<sup>22</sup> Echoing Schumacher, the cultivation of

---

<sup>22</sup> *A Compass Towards a Just and Harmonious Society: 2015 GNH Survey Report* (Thimpu, Bhutan: Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016), 30.

wisdom guides and shapes growth qualitatively and measures such growth quantitatively. How much of what goods are sufficient for the overall flourishing of an ecology?

What, then, in this context, is spirituality?

Ultimately, spirituality can be defined as compassion, an attitude that takes into consideration the wellbeing of sentient beings, which includes of course, other people. Understood in this general way, a convergence between politics and spirituality cannot be controversial if spirituality is at the heart of governance. It rules out any major policies, any laws, any programs that are not consistent with compassion and concern for others. Spirituality does not necessarily mean following a particular religion or a particular school of religion as a whole. It does not exclude plural identities.<sup>23</sup>

Far from being motivated by an interest in our own happiness (the self-love of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker), Bhutan's conception of wisdom-infused happiness is dedicated to the flourishing of the entire ecology of which human cultures are a part and in which they share life interdependently with all of the ecology's life forms. In the words of the first elected Prime Minister of Bhutan, Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley:

We have now clearly distinguished the 'happiness' ... in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable 'feel good' moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, the idiom of the compassionate wisdom that seeks to promote the causes and conditions of whole systems of flourishing has its obvious local roots.<sup>25</sup> Given the precipitous ecological course of our runaway global economic madness, it is not hard to imagine that not only is mutual flourishing contingent on an awakening to some version of the above principles, but so are the *survival* of the present regimes of life, human and nonhuman.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>24</sup> Karma Ura, Sabina Alkire, Tshoki Zangmo, and Karma Wangdi, *A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index*, (Thimpu, Bhutan: Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2012), 7.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent collection of essays devoted to retrieving the deep ecosophy in the world's spiritual traditions, see *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, ed. David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Of special interest is the exceptional essay by David Landis Barnhill on Huayan Buddha Dharma, which demonstrates how powerful Buddha Dharma analysis can be for making deep ecology more nimble and less trapped by the letter of its two inaugurating principles.

## 2.

One would think that someone who tried to rethink an ecological political economy no longer subject to the dominating hierarchies of the pyramid (with the upper centile of the upper centile propped up on the backs of most all of the world's population and consuming ravidly and with impunity) and toward charting a liberatory course through "*qualitative* descriptions of ecosystems ... rooted in organic evolution, variety, and holism"<sup>26</sup> in an intricate web would welcome, even if with some reservations, the broad project of deep ecology. Murray Bookchin and his broadly "eco-anarchic" program of social ecology instead launched a severe polemic against it.

The stakes are simply too high to abandon the fundamental insight of deep ecology (the cultivation of compassionate wisdom that reimagines political economy in a way that promotes the flourishing of entire ecologies). This is also to grant that it has sometimes been compromised by various New Age vagaries or interpreted callously (e.g., biotic equality as an excuse for not addressing harms to other human beings). The same stakes are also too high not to rethink deep ecology in light of Bookchin's powerful insights and emendations. He took up the nascent ecological thrust found in earlier anarchists like Kropotkin and brought it to new heights. Bookchin's social ecology shares to a significant extent Kropotkin's commitment to decentralizing and reconfiguring dominating hierarchies. That being said, Bookchin did not emphasize negatively the abolishment of the state but rather positively the founding and promotion of liberatory institutions that are decentralized, non-dominating, on a human scale, and accountable to direct democracy. Rather than stopping at the formal equality of justice as an endgame (the reduction of social life to a bare minimum where everyone is treated equally), he argued positively for freedom, itself an ethical concern exceeding the mere satisfaction of needs. At the heart of this, Bookchin argued that the key problem is not, as the Marxists insist, class exploitation, but rather our long history of domination, of which class exploitation is a species. Hierarchical domination—humans over other humans, states over their subjects, the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, the upper centile over the 99%, feudal landlords over serfs, slaveowners over the enslaved, white supremacists over people of color, men over women, even capitalists over nature—is the perennial problem.

We do not dominate each other because we gave up our Neolithic communities and began dominating the earth with agrarian production. Rather, earth domination—and the consequent spatial alienation analyzed in thinkers like Schumacher and Coulthard— is an outgrowth of the historical emergence of hierarchy. Bookchin shares Marshall Sahlins' admiration (in the latter's

---

<sup>26</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, revised edition (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2005), 90-91.

*Stone Age Economics*, 1974) of the egalitarian and therefore free Neolithic societies. It was the collapse of these that gave rise to the hierarchical pyramid: at the top, the elite, and dominated below, the many. It was a small step to extend this paradigm to the natural world. The vast earth is for the benefit of an elite species, and the majority of that species is for the benefit of the privileged few: “the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human.”<sup>27</sup>

One does not, however, need, as Bookchin does, to pin an account of the problem of domination on the veracity of a particular account of Neolithic societies or any other historical social configuration. Although such evidence is abundant, instructive, and valuable, the overreliance on such long dialectical historical narratives reveals more about Bookchin’s Hegelian (“evolutionary dialectic”) commitments to a Grand Narrative and explanatory origin story than it does about the ruinous conflict between political economy and ecology. Warnings about the ruinous separation of the human mind from its ecological moorings are as old as some of the great early Buddha and Daoist Elders. Stories of not heeding one’s responsibility to the land are rife in Indigenous storytelling on Turtle Island. In fact, the very notion of Turtle Island emerges from learning to become responsible to the land after the calamity of having failed to do so. Regardless of its origin, domination is an enormous historical inheritance, political and economic challenge, and rapidly developing ecological crisis. Regardless of the cultural origins of humanity, if we *can* cooperate with each other and with our ecological conditions, then we *should*. Anthropological evidence of how humans may have done so in the Neolithic period and beyond just contributes further compelling reasons for the wisdom of the deep ecological turn.

Although domination is an historical inheritance, it was and is not inevitable. It was the admirable force of Kropotkin’s 1902 *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* to demonstrate, countering the Social Darwinist apology for the survival and triumph of the fittest in capitalist societies, that, although there may be an instinct for competition, there is also an instinct for cooperation, an instinct often far more advantageous and prevalent through all of life, human and nonhuman. Bookchin wisely did not see any need to root cooperation exclusively in our instinctual drives. Bookchin argues that it emerges in second nature, that is, it is, just like hierarchy, a way of responding to nature from within nature. It is enough to say that there are compelling ethical-ecological (and “spiritual”) reasons for favoring mutual aid over domination. These reasons include intervening on our current path of species auto-extinction, human flourishing through the flourishing of the ecosystems that sustain us, and the wisdom of human

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 65; cf. *ibid.*, 34: “The very idea of dominating first nature has its origins in the domination of human by human” which for Bookchin is “the social origin of our most serious ecological problems.”

life emancipated from domination and oppression. An ecology of freedom institutes our unity in diversity.<sup>28</sup>

An ecology of freedom, we might add, has the added advantage of no longer compartmentalizing historic obstacles to human freedom. Ecological flourishing cannot be isolated from our social and political problems. It is no longer an exclusive disjunction between political crises like Black Lives Matter, economic equity, or feminist advancement on the one hand and the ecological crisis on the other hand. The ecological crisis includes *all forms of domination*, and the enactment of a just society as well as the restoration of our ecological relationships are both necessary conditions for the flourishing conditions of liberated human life. And what better model for intersectionality than the web of natural and social life?

So how can this not be an essential emendation of the deep ecology sensibility?

Certainly, it forces us to reconsider the limits of its two classical principles, understanding the self with regards to the Self and biotic equality. The former principle has come under fire in several quarters, and it reflects Naess's own early immersion in Hindu thought where at the moment of supreme awakening, the self (*Ātman*) finds itself one with the supreme absolute One (*Brahman*).<sup>29</sup> Feminists have rightly charged such formulations as being excessively male—it's all about me and my (typically male) self.<sup>30</sup> Adherents of the Buddha Way have objected for over two and a half millennia to the attachment to the self. No-self (*anatman*) does not melt away into a great One, where everything is everything else. Rather, it no longer dominates being with ego attachments. It seeks to be mindful of the interdependent web not in general, but now and here, an awakening to the dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that is the singularity of each moment. Nāgārjuna—perhaps the greatest and most radical of all Buddha Dharma philosophers—claimed in his masterpiece, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*,<sup>31</sup> that

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>29</sup> Ermine L. Algaier IV detects the limits of Naess's expansive view of the Self from the perspective of Dōgen's Zen: "From a strictly Buddhist perspective, this is the heart of the anthropocentric view and the problem that limits Naess's deep ecology: it is not a metaphysical issue, but one of epistemological changes developed through self-cultivation. Returning to Naess's question of limits, he is correct when, speaking from the ordinary standpoint, that there is a problem of identification when we move beyond the realm of plants. Mountains and rivers are not sentient beings and therefore we cannot identify with them. Being insentient, the very idea of realization is absurd. However, when we approach the same problem through Dōgen, this is a problematic and one-sided view." Ermine L. Algaier IV, "The Natural World: Naess, Dōgen, and the Question of Limits," *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 37 (Spring 2015), 117.

<sup>30</sup> See Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*, trans. and ed. Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013).

the view, *prapañca* (hypostatization or reification), of emptiness turns that which is designed to rid one of all *prapañca* into the worst *prapañca* of all: “those for whom emptiness is a *prapañca* have been called incurable.”<sup>32</sup> His great successor, Chandrakīrti, quotes the Buddha’s dialogue with Kāśyapa on this point. If the psychic or purgative to cure a disease is not itself expelled, is the person cured? Kāśyapa responded that the “illness of the person would be more intense.”<sup>33</sup> Those who hypostasize the Buddha, Nāgārjuna latter argues, are “deceived” and “fail to see the Tathāgata.”<sup>34</sup> There is no one self-standing One that either the Buddha or beings of this world is, especially not a One called nothing: “Emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted, like a serpent wrongly held or a spell wrongly executed.”<sup>35</sup> To say that everything is empty, or that everything has Buddha nature, or all is One, is simply a skillful purgative to reawaken one to the ceaseless temporal and spatial singularities of the web, now and here.

Admittedly, such a refined sense of the Buddha Dharma does not always carry the day. The mystification of New Age Deep Ecology is prone to such pernicious reveries about emptiness and oneness. Rather than a rational utopia, New Age Deep Ecology provides a mystical fantasy based on the *deus ex machina* intuitions of the One. For Bookchin, such mystical intuitions are also hopelessly Romantic, a starry-eyed reactionary nostalgia for a return to the good old Neolithic days, or a “strident fetishization of ‘wilderness’”<sup>36</sup> rather than cooperatively shaping human society for the flourishing and liberation of its ecologies.

Although Bookchin’s polemic against what I am calling the mystification of New Age Deep Ecology addresses prevalent popular misunderstandings, and as such, is well taken, his characterization of a “strident fetishization of ‘wilderness’” is ill-conceived. Gary Snyder’s *Practice of the Wild*, for instance, does not privilege wild areas over domesticated areas nor does it mystically elevate the wild. The wild is Snyder’s translation of Dharma. It is the dynamic play of emptiness and form in the wild processes to which all beings are subject. Cities and capitalism are as much wild processes as natural ecologies. The problem of the former is that they practice their relationship to their grounding wildness without wisdom. The problem with cities and capitalism is that they are alienated from the underlying wild processes that sustain them and consequently the Wild is banished as a big Other, the opposite of (and threat to) the domestic and cultivated. A spiritual practice of the Wild is non-dualistically grounded in the

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>36</sup> Bookchin, 17.

Wild.<sup>37</sup> Or, to use Bookchin's helpful locution, it is a social (cultivated) practice grounded in place. Bookchin's contentious predilection for a strawman characterization of deep ecology prevents him from recognizing the proximity of these practices.

Bookchin contended that the principle of biotic equality is similarly blurred by this vague evocation of the "crude pantheism of a universal 'Oneness'"<sup>38</sup>—all sentient beings are One. Although I suspect that Bookchin knew next to nothing about the Buddha Way, he shares its sense of radical singularities amid a dynamically evolving complexity (Indra's Net). What biotic equality gets right for Bookchin is its refusal of hierarchy and the domination of all other species by the human species. Although equality avoids hierarchy, it nonetheless remains mired in its evocation of a vague Oneness of all life.

Although biotic equality avoids the "command and obey"<sup>39</sup> of domination and submission, it forgets that differences and distinctions do not necessarily imply hierarchy. An ecology of freedom institutes diversity in unity and unity in diversity. Biodiversity and cultural diversity speak to the health of ecosystems, not to the need to establish chains of command. However, it is not fair to the project of deep ecology to charge with the mystification of oneness. Although the letter of the principle of biotic equality is not always as clear as it could be about Bookchin's objection, the practice of deep ecology is committed to complexity, not vagueness.

## Conclusion

What are some of the ways that the wisdom of deep ecology can be sharpened by Bookchin's social ecology?

Given deep ecology's fundamental commitment to non-anthropocentric complexity, it would serve the project well to avoid any confusion between the complexity of intersecting bioregional webs and nets and the evocation of oneness. Non-anthropocentric interdependence (as in, for example, *pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent co-origination in Buddha Dharma) might be more effective than speaking of the Self or biotic equality. Moreover, reliance on a notion of Oneness does not provide political and economic remedies to the many oppressive hierarchies already in operation. We can invoke Oneness all we want, but the painful fact remains that white supremacists do not regard themselves as One with people of color, that humans assume dominion over the earth and its creatures, and threatened

---

<sup>37</sup> For more on this, see my *Mountains, Rivers and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen in an Age of Ecological Crisis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Bookchin, 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

species are not the same as the rats and crows that thrive on the waste of rich economies. To value all of life by valuing the interdependent webs of life should make one more prone to the distinctions and disparities that emerge in such an evaluation. Biotic equality, for example, might better be expressed as a preferential option for the poor, in this case, the marginalized, threatened, and endangered lifeforms among us. Rather than being awash in the equality of biotic life, one gives special consideration to the lifeforms that are currently threatened or endangered by industrial lifeways. We attend to the interdependent web first by attending to its most vulnerable members.

Deep ecology can also sharpen its account of its own normative features and not rely exclusively on its grounding intuitions. For Bookchin, first nature, nature qua nature, is neither good nor bad. It is second nature, the part of nature that responds to nature, that does not *discover or intuit or mystically experience* that nature is valuable, but rather, reflecting on “first” nature, deems a non-destructive relationship to it to be good. (This is the missing step in Rolston III’s overturning of the naturalistic fallacy.) If we imagine that we, at a reflective distance from nature, are no longer subject to it, then we risk losing nature all together. Reflection can nonetheless arch back on its original ensconcement in nature and see the relationship between first nature and second nature as ethical. First nature is “a nature that forms the ground for a human ethics.”<sup>40</sup> Second nature is the opportunity to take responsibility for our grounding in the interdependent web of first nature.

That being said, whether we understand this relationship as rational (Bookchin) or as intuitive (deep ecology) or as having elements of both (the position of this paper), we can see that what I have characterized as “spirituality” is not ipso facto irrational or a mystification. It is the relationship between first and second nature that puts the *social* in social ecology. *Wise ecology is social responsibility for the interdependent web of our first nature.* Spirituality (in the sense argued for in this paper) is cultivated and learned, not magically delivered or reliant upon miracles. Deep ecology cannot be a recovery of a lost but more primary relationship to nature because a relationship to nature, ancient or contemporary, is itself a social mediation. It is not a return to nature but rather a reconciliation of first and second nature, that is, an ongoing nurturing of the social in its natural grounding. The restoration of a non-dominating, non-egocentric, ecologically communitarian cooperation with nature is the cultivation of a spiritually

---

<sup>40</sup> Murray Bookchin, “Recovering Evolution: A Reply to Eckersley and Fox,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990), note 9. In passing, I note that it is unfortunate that Bookchin, mired in Hegel and Marx, never took Schelling seriously. *Naturphilosophie* can be read as a deep social ecology. The same goes for Naess who, too grounded in Spinoza, would have profited enormously from Schelling’s deft reworking of him. For the latter, see Boris van Meurs, “Deep Ecology and Nature: Naess, Spinoza, Schelling,” *The Trumpeter* 35, no. 1 (2019): 3-21. See also Jason M. Wirth, *Schelling’s Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), especially chapter one.

ethical form of social mediation. In the language of spirituality that I have been associating with deep ecology, it is not necessarily to posit a spiritual dimension against a natural dimension as it is to respond culturally to the wild ground of our being with practices that clarify and enhance our relationship to that ground. We will need democratically transparent liberatory political-economic institutions on a global scale to fight for the dignity of biodiversity and to save ourselves from ourselves. As Damian Gerber argues, this is “socialism’s first step into the glade of *political* wisdom, a socialism shorn of all mystical moralizing about the workers.”<sup>41</sup>

It is also worth remembering, as Bookchin insists, that green consumption, organic farms, fair trade clothing, and mystical evocations of biotic equality are no threat to capitalism. Markets are rapacious and capitalism welcomes the new opportunities promised by deep ecological lifestyles and “their many high-priced artifacts.”<sup>42</sup> This is no doubt a fatal criticism of New Age Deep Ecology, which anesthetizes itself in ecological fantasies in order to avoid looking at the economic underpinnings (and their ecological costs) of such reveries. Spiritual mystification obscures the economic inequalities and exploitation that enable the time and leisure for spiritual searches, fancy yoga retreats, and high-priced gurus.

It also enervates the spiritual impulse. Rather than energizing and clarifying deep social changes, it becomes a symptom of their underlying “disempowerment,” a “mystical patina to conceal their empty lives.”<sup>43</sup> Even in wealthy countries, there is a huge difference between capitalist power and those under its yoke. As Andreas Malm argues, the position that the ecological crisis inculcates equally all of humanity is the second greatest ruse after outright climate change denialism: “climate change has come about because a fortunate few have appropriated the bulk of the atmospheric carbon sink through massive emissions *which by definition cannot be extended to humanity as a whole.*”<sup>44</sup>

These are all reasons for thinking the two approaches together. Deep ecology does not live and die by the letter of its two principles. It is first and foremost the cultivation of wisdom and wisdom practices rooted in a non-alienated sense of place (first nature). Domination may explain our spatial alienation, but wisdom and its attendant practices and institutions are its antidote. Justice in the political sphere has the same roots as justice in the biosphere. Deep ecology does not cede politics and economics to political science, business economics, and

---

<sup>41</sup> Damian Gerber, *The Distortion of Nature’s Image: Reification and the Ecological Crisis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 184-185.

<sup>42</sup> Bookchin, 20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York and London: Verso, 2016), 390.

ethics. It asks, “what kind of a society would be the best for maintaining a particular ecosystem?” Societies that dominate their ecosystems have not ended well and that seems more likely to be the case in the future. Deep social ecology is the cultivation of wisdom for robust social changes that addresses the manners in which we dominate each other as well as most other forms of life. It is to take responsibility for the web.

The ongoing refinement of our ecological analyses in their social, anarchic (that is, decentralized yet interdependent) dynamics and in their liberatory possibility—why not consider Gross Earth Happiness?—is the work of *deep social ecology*. Or, if the word “deep” has been rendered inoperable by misuse and misunderstanding, perhaps we could speak of a *wise social ecology*. Deep ecology’s resources are wider and more plentiful than Bookchin recognized. Its alliances and cooperative possibilities, as well as its practices and manifestations, exceed his estimation. Before we rush to debates over policy, it is important to deepen our overall sense of the whole and to approach it with wisdom. Otherwise, policy operates within a sense of the whole that it cannot and does not challenge.

Compassionate wisdom does not seek to dominate, but rather to affirm, cherish, and cooperate. It is a fundamental orientation. A mere account of the evolutionary dialectical movement of nature, or a rational assessment of our political and ecological prospects, are in themselves insufficient to motivate change. (I wrote this in a country in which 70 million people in a pandemic voted to reelect Donald Trump and I recollect that workers have a worrisome history of embracing authoritarian and ecologically ruinous leaders and institutions.) Wisdom must first be cultivated, starting with the selves that would reshape our institutions. The cultivation of such wisdom does not settle for the continued survival of our own species, but rather understands the latter in terms of an interdependent Gross Earth Happiness for All.

## Works Cited

- Algaier IV, Ermine L. 2015. "The Natural World: Naess, Dōgen, and the Question of Limits." *Environmental Ethics* 37. 1 : 99-118.
- Barnhill, David Landis, and Roger S. Gottlieb, editors. 2001. *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Francis. 2020. *Fratelli Tutti*. Encyclical letter. Vatican website. October 3, 2020. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)
- Bookchin, Murray. 1990. "Recovering Evolution: A Reply to Eckersley and Fox." *Environmental Ethics* 12. 3: 253-274.
- . 2005. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Revised edition. Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press.
- Centre for Bhutan Studies. 2016. *A Compass Towards a Just and Harmonious Society: 2015 GNH Survey Report*. Thimpu, Bhutan: Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Devall, Bill, and George Sessions. 2007. *Deep Ecology*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith.
- Diamond, Irene, and Gloria Orenstein, editors. 1990. *Reweaving the World the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Gerber, Damian. 2019. *The Distortion of Nature's Image: Reification and the Ecological Crisis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Helm, Dieter. 2015. *Natural Capital: Valuing Our Planet*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1923. *Werke*. Volume 6. Edited by Ernst Cassirer. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag.
- Kropotkin, Piotr. 1925. *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Malm, Andreas. 2016. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. New York and London: Verso.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 2006. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Penguin. First

published 1848.

Mathews, Freya. 2003. *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*. Third revised edition. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nāgārjuna. 2013. *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*. Translated and edited by Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Plumwood, Val. 2001. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London and New York: Routledge.

Rolston, Holmes. 2005. "Challenges in Environmental Ethics." In *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 4th ed., edited by Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, Karen J. Warren, Irene J. Klaver, and John Clark. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Sahlins, Marshall. 2017. *Stone Age Economics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Schelling, FWJ. 1856-1861. *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände* (1809). In *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, Division 1, Volume 7, edited by Karl Friedrich August Schelling. Stuttgart-Augsburg: J. G. Cotta.

Schumacher, E. F. 2010. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Singer, Peter. 1975. *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals*. New York: New York Review.

Smith, Adam. 1999. *The Wealth of Nations, Books I-III*. London: Penguin.

Snyder, Gary. 2010. *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.

Ura, Karma, Sabina Alkire, Tshoki Zangmo, and Karma Wangdi. 2012. *A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index*. Thimphu, Bhutan: Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research.

Van Meurs, Boris. 2019. "Deep Ecology and Nature: Naess, Spinoza, Schelling." *The Trumpeter*, 35. 1: 3-21.

Wirth, Jason M. 2015. *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination*. Albany: State

University of New York Press.

———. 2017. *Mountains, Rivers and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen in an Age of Ecological Crisis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.