

BIOREGION, ECO-POLIS, AND ECO (NOMIC)-FEDERATION: LEFT-LIBERTARIAN MODELS OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Summary

Ecolibertarians insist that the centralized control exercised by nation-states constitutes a causal factor in, rather than a useful response to, the environmental crisis. While libertarianism today is most commonly associated with a right-wing, laissez-faire liberalism, it also encompasses a left-wing which is predominantly anarchist and strongly environmentalist. Emphasizing the inherent interrelatedness of non-sustainable, centralized modes of organization in ecology (monoculture), politics (nation-states), and economics (capitalism/state capitalism), eco-anarchists, in general, advocate a polyculture, politics, and production oriented around increasing local self-sufficiency and ecoregional integrity. Which specific proposals they advance depends, however, on the relative priorities they accord to cultural, political, and economic change and consequently on whether they subscribe to the tenets of individualist, communist, or syndicalist anarchism. For individualist anarchist, deep ecologist, and neo-Luddite Kirkpatrick Sale, the (mono)culture of industrialism must be replaced by a sustainable bioregional culture, like that of native Amerindians, that encourages people to nurture, to dwell within the limits set by, and to maintain the diversity of local environments.

Anarchocommunist social ecologist Murray Bookchin insists that sustainability is ultimately a matter of politics and ethics and that the practical measures required to implement it environmentally are easily introduced once a sustainable democracy, in the form of a directly democratic, libertarian confederal municipalism, has been instituted. Seeking a sustainable democracy capable of embracing both the economic and the political, Graham Purchase calls for the union of a federally-coordinated green anarchosyndicalism with a federally-coordinated ecoregionalism. Capitalism today is moving toward a globalized, post-Fordist phase associated with a decentralized spatiality, the rise of a new class of service and marginal workers, the decline of the centralist left, and the concurrent rise of a right-libertarian neo-liberalism. If it were to federate with, not colonize, other new social movements, a non-naturalistic anarchosyndicalist ecoregionalism could constitute a sustainable left-libertarian alternative to post-Fordist right-libertarianism.

1. Introduction: Left-Libertarian Ecopolitics and the Issue of Ecological Sustainability

The concept of sustainable development, popularized by the 1987 Brundtland report on development and the environment, has been subject to multiple interpretations and criticisms. Various types of reformist liberal and social democratic environmentalism have taken it as a call for the greening of capitalism. Ecosocialists have critiqued it, insisting that what is needed is not an ecologically sustainable form of capitalism – given capitalism's inherent growth ethic, this would in any case seem to be a blatant contradiction in terms – but the move to a socialist economy. State ownership of the means of production, argue the great majority of ecosocialists, would ensure that development was rationally planned so that it would remain, of necessity, within ecological constraints. Deep ecologists and ecofeminists, who object to the implicit assumption in sustainable development that non-human life-forms and inorganic components of ecosystems exist only for the purpose of supplying raw material to be developed by industrial or technocratic Western society, have tended to substitute the more environmentally benign notion of sustainability. However, what unites these liberal and social democratic environmentalists and most ecosocialists, deep ecologists, and ecofeminists is their conviction that the move to environmental sustainability depends absolutely upon the implementation and enforcement of ecologically-oriented legislation by strong, centralist state governments.

In direct contrast to the state-centered proposals put forward by those subscribing to the ecopolitical orientations listed above, ecolibertarians insist that the centralized control exercised by the nation-state constitutes a causal factor in, rather than a useful response to, the environmental crisis. Libertarianism, in its most inclusive sense, is a political stance that stresses the negative aspects of state power, emphasizing instead people's inherent capacity to organize their own affairs and to do so more effectively when they are free from external governance. Nevertheless, in common usage today, the term "libertarian" is almost always restricted to laissez-faire liberalism. Adherents to this extreme right-wing form of liberalism object to state interference in the capitalist economy as well as to state intervention in the social sphere in the form of welfare provisions and the regulation of moral behavior. If they are environmentalists, such ecolibertarians – in actual fact, these are relatively small in number – tend to subscribe

to a right-wing form of ecocapitalist politics. This politics is rooted in the thesis that only a market unhindered by the unnecessary measures imposed by well-meaning but inevitably blundering government bureaucrats can regulate the development of economically-important environmental resources in a manner that is sustainable or, recasting this notion in terms favored by the libertarian right, “efficient.”

Yet, contemporary ecolibertarian politics also has a left wing. Libertarian socialists reject not only the oppressive and authoritarian state-socialist regimes characteristic of former Eastern Bloc countries but also the state-centered forms of socialism advocated by both Marxists and social democrats. However, since most ecosocialists hold social democratic or Marxist views, libertarian ecosocialists tend to be few and far between. Moreover, due to both their small numbers and their diverse perspectives, they are not easily characterized as holding any definitive set of views. This leaves the anarchists – the left or anti-capitalist libertarians who adopted the label libertarian long before the abuses associated with Stalinism came to light; indeed, anarchists predicted the rise of Stalinism from Marxism before the fact. Consistently rejecting the compromises with the nation-state and with liberal capitalism advocated by Marxists and social democrats alike, many anarchists espouse an environmental ethos with antecedents long pre-dating those of the recently formulated ecosocialism. The majority of ecolibertarians are, in fact, anarchists.

While the term “libertarianism” has undergone a severe contraction in its range of applicability, the word “anarchy” has been subjected to a gross (and arguably ideological) distortion in its meaning. Equated in everyday usage with chaos, disorder, unprovoked violence, and even terrorism, an ecopolitics described as anarchist is thus unfortunately likely to inspire fear and revulsion in those unfamiliar with this political orientation. Moreover, others who possess only a limited understanding of the term – and this is especially true of many social democrats and state-centered socialists – tend to dismiss the anarchist rejection of the state as naïve and simplistic, insisting instead that the state is essential for the ordering of complex modern societies. However, the term anarchy, at its most basic etymological level, actually signifies a mode of social organization that is “an-archic” or without hierarchy. Hence, rather than condemning order per se, it proscribes only hierarchical order – an untenable order based on the authority vested in institutionalized religion, tradition, dominant class interests, high-status social groupings, and usurped or alienated, and subsequently centralized, political power. This is in contrast to the authority associated with competency and relevant experience. To anarchists, it is hierarchical and centralized order, order imposed by elites manipulatively seeking to control the activities and fallaciously claiming to represent the interests of the many, which is really the simplistic form. Anarchistic order, which builds on the liberated capacity of the many to order their own affairs and those of the society in which they live, is, in contrast, a complex form of order.

When not conflated with disorder or dismissed as simplistic, anarchism, which actually encompasses a much wider and more diverse political tradition than socialism, tends to be collapsed into just one of its particular forms. In contemporary, especially North American, political circles, this particular form is almost always individualist anarchism (although what exactly this stance encompasses is presently a subject generating much controversy among various groups of anarchists themselves) and, in ecopolitical circles,

it is usually the eco-anarchism of social ecologist Murray Bookchin. In actual fact, however, anarchism can be viewed as stretching across the political spectrum from right-wing liberalism to left-wing socialism. Similarly, eco-anarchism overlaps, on its liberal side, with animal liberationism, ecoprimitivism, and non-statist forms of deep ecology (that must be distinguished from the dominant, statist orientation of deep ecology theorists such as Arne Naess and Robyn Eckersley). At the left end of its socialist side, it overlaps with libertarian ecosocialism and critical ecofeminism (which is being outlined by ecofeminists such as Australian philosopher Val Plumwood). Those forms of anarchism that share some of the fundamental assumptions of liberalism can be most consistently (if not unanimously) categorized as anarcho-individualism or individualist anarchism; those forms which acknowledge an affiliation to socialism are generally classified as social anarchism or, more specifically, as either anarchocommunism or anarchosyndicalism.

Contemporary individualist anarchists, who presently represent the majority tendency in American anarchism, can be most usefully characterized as subscribing to the basic liberal tenet of ontological individualism but not, with the exception of a fringe group of laissez-faire libertarians who identify themselves as anarchocapitalists, to its tenet of acquisitive individualism. This ontological individualism they most likely derive from their American heritage of Jeffersonian liberalism rather than from the founder of classical anarcho-individualism – the nihilist Max Stirner, an early associate of Marx in the days when both were still Young Hegelians. Based on their critique of capitalism, which many present-day individualist anarchists couch as industrialism to avoid any identification with political revolution or existing socialism, they could be considered left-wing liberals. Individualist anarchists, however, tend to strongly eschew any identification either with the left or with liberalism. Indeed, due to their rejection of the liberal defense of private property and their affirmation of community, many would even classify themselves as anarchocommunists or, more commonly, as anarchocommunalists – a classification that leftist social anarchists hotly contend. In actual fact, most liberals and even some libertarians also value community; where they, along with individualist anarchists, depart from socialists and social anarchists is in understanding such community, in line with their basic ontological individualism, as merely an aggregate of its individual members. Given such an understanding of community, many individualist anarchists proceed further to reject not only representative democracy, as do all anarchists in principle, but also direct democracy. Conflating the use of mandated, recallable, and rotatable deputies with representation and thus regarding even the former as a negation of the fundamental sovereignty of the individual, they effectively rule out any form of political participation that is applicable to modern civic settings. In keeping with individualist anarchists in general, they accord primacy instead to cultural change and issues relating to individual lifestyles. A small number of primitivist individualists take this principle to such an extreme that they view even the most basic division of labor as an infringement on their independence and hence object to any technology that cannot be made and operated by the self-sufficient individual. Indeed, depending on the extent to which its adherents take the principle of ontological individualism, individualist anarchism can be subdivided into a wide diversity of groups including: anarchocapitalists, ecoprimitivists, nihilists, neo-Luddites, individualists proper, sexual libertarians, post-situationists, existentialists, animal liberationists, (non-statist) deep ecologists, and contractual mutualists.

Strongly rejecting the ontological individualism of individualist anarchists for its complicity with the bourgeois order, present-day anarchocommunists – who, because of the Stalinist associations clinging to the label communist, often prefer to call themselves anarchocommunalists – embrace instead the ontological holism characteristic of socialism. As anti-authoritarian leftists, anarchocommunists, however, distinguish themselves from Marxists by regarding the state not only as a reflection of the economic relations pervading civil society but also as a site possessing its own specific set of power relations. For the Marxist primacy of the economic, they therefore substitute the anarchocommunist primacy of the political. In removing the economic from its position of primacy, moreover, they depose the proletariat from its central role as the agent of revolutionary change and subsequently discard the mechanism, but not the revolutionary nature, of that change – class struggle. Hence, in place of the class-based politics of Marxism, they espouse a populist politics rooted in universal human interests. In place of class struggle, they emphasize the struggle by citizens to achieve direct democracy and community self-management in the form of a decentralized, confederal municipalism operating via the use of mandated, recallable, and rotatable delegates. Furthermore, by not concentrating their focus on the proletarian arena of the capitalist factory, they have expanded the area of socialist concern to include – especially through the work of Marx’s contemporaries, the early social anarchist geographers Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus – the land and thus ultimately the environment at large. As a consequence, anarcho-communism today is, in contrast to both Marxist forms of socialism and anarcho-individualism, virtually synonymous with green anarcho-communism and with the major form thereof – the social ecology of Bookchin.

Anarchosyndicalists also share the ontological holism of socialists, albeit in a collectivist form – *syndicat* being the French for union (of workers) – rather than in the organic, communalist form espoused by anarcho-communists. Like Marxists, they emphasize the economic, the key role to be played by the proletariat, and the importance of class struggle. However, as anti-authoritarians, they promote the organization of the working class from below through a federated system of workers’ councils rather than from above via the proletarian party and vanguard favored by Marxists. (Indeed, Michael Bakunin, the major theoretical influence on anarchosyndicalism, was highly critical of his socialist contemporary Marx for advocating these hierarchical structures.) Such an anti-authoritarian means of organization is designed to be consistent with and even to anticipate the anti-authoritarian end it is intended to bring about. This end is to ultimately provoke, via resistance, boycotts, and propaganda, a revolutionary general strike leading to the collapse of capitalism and the capitalist state and their replacement with a more developed and refined version of the same federated council system. This is in direct contrast to the Marxist aim to seize the hierarchical bourgeois state and operate it in the interest of the proletariat until it withers away of its own accord leaving a classless and stateless society. Moreover, rather than restricting the proletariat to an elite of industrial workers, anarcho-syndicalists employ a more expansive conception of the working class which embraces all productive workers including independent artisans, those employed in small workshops, and peasants. Not only does anarchosyndicalism embrace such workers but historically such workers, particularly in the less developed countries of early twentieth-century southern Europe and Latin America, often embraced it as well in preference to Marxism. Its emphasis on the field and the small workshop as well as the factory (albeit, in actual practice, more emphasis was placed on

the latter) also gives this form of anarchism a connection to environmental concerns that is traditionally lacking in Marxism. However, this connection has yet to be developed to the extent that it has been in anarchocommunism and thus green anarchosyndicalism represents a relatively new and minority tendency within syndicalist anarchism but, given current changes in the structure of capitalism, one with some very interesting possibilities.

For eco-anarchists, sustainable development – which they would interpret as the sustaining of capitalist or, alternatively, industrial development – is a deeply problematic concept and even environmental sustainability is far too limited a proposal to encompass the end that they seek. On the environmental level, while sustainability would be a necessary minimum, what eco-anarchists are actually attempting to achieve is an ecological society in which non-human nature would flourish in a rich diversity of forms rather than merely being rendered stable and manageable in its present reduced, degraded state. Furthermore, a call restricted to a narrowly couched environmental sustainability ignores the major political and economic changes that eco-anarchists in general argue are essential, not only for humanity's sake, but also to ensure the necessary conditions for the thriving of non-human nature. As anarchists, they seek to end the inter-human domination entailed in political oppression and economic exploitation and thus to realize a free society where humans too can flourish. In order to be both ecological and free, such a society, all would agree, must necessarily be a decentralized one. Ecologically, this would mean that a centrally conceived and administered monoculture, which imposes its uniform plant-stocks and methods on the immense diversity of natural and cultural systems, must be displaced by organic modes of food production that are in harmony with local conditions. Politically, the centralized nation-state must be replaced by non-hierarchical and participatory modes of decision-making in order to deal effectively with matters of common concern. Economically, the competitive and exploitative capitalist system of production must be abolished in favor of a mode of organizing work that is cooperative and mutualistic on the levels of both inter-human interaction and the interaction between humanity and nature at large. However, the specific proposals advanced by various eco-anarchists to achieve a society that is ecological and free depend fundamentally on the relative priorities they accord to cultural, political, and economic change and consequently on whether they subscribe to the tenets of individualist, communist, or syndicalist anarchism.

In order to evaluate the specific proposals that contemporary eco-anarchists have made regarding how to attain an ecological society that is sustainable in its widest and deepest sense, it is therefore most useful to consider the particular analyses and practical suggestions offered by individualist, communist, and syndicalist forms of eco-anarchism. This will be done, in the next three sections, by critically examining the most significant approach to each of these three forms of eco-anarchism: the bioregionalism of American journalist Kirkpatrick Sale, the libertarian municipalism of American social ecology activist-theorist Murray Bookchin, and the anarchosyndicalist ecoregionalism of Australian philosopher Graham Purchase. That will then be followed by a short concluding section in which the relevance of eco-anarchism will be appraised in light of contemporary changes, which have been termed post-Fordist, in the mode of organization of capitalism.

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Biographical Sketch

Regina Cochrane teaches in the University of Calgary’s interdisciplinary Faculty of Communication and Culture. Before beginning her doctoral studies, she taught physics, chemistry, mathematics, and ESL at the high school, adult, and college levels in Canada, Ghana, and China and was active in the Third World solidarity, peace, environmental, and women’s movements. Her doctoral dissertation, “Feminism, Ecology, and Negative Dialectics: Toward a Feminist Green Political Theory,” which was completed in the Department of Political Science at York University in Toronto in 1998, constitutes an ecofeminist appropriation of the early Frankfurt School critical theory of Theodor Adorno.