A Conceptual Note of Eco-Socialism

Definition
Eco-socialism is a "current of ecological thought and action" (Löwy, 2005, p. 18) that encompasses elements of Marxism, socialism, ecology, and radical philosophy (Adams, 2009). It adopts the critical views of Marxism about unequal relations between the various social classes and it shares the discourses of liberty and human equality that are prevalent in socialist thought. Kovel (2007) adds a new dimension to eco-socialism, describing it as a new mode of production in which freely associated labor chooses eco-centric values to restore natural environment damage. This implies a redefinition of the notion of "wealth" through establishing an egalitarian and democratic society and an alternative mode of life in which communal ownership of the means of production plays a crucial role (Kovel 2007; Kovel & Löwy, 2001). Thus, eco-socialism calls for radical changes in society, a view which it shares with some other radical counter-currents such as eco-anarchism. At the same time, it differs from some radical discourses, because it has a more anthropocentric character and thus avoids the rejection of humanism as presented, for example, in deep ecology (Adams, 2009).

History
The foundation for the formulation of eco-socialist theory was laid in the mid-19th century when the first criticism of the capitalist-industrial model was expressed by the Romantics such as Rousseau and Leroux, whose work embodied a nostalgic attitude towards pre-modern organic communities (Löwy, 2002). Marx and Engels added their major contributions, although they did not utilize ecological terminology (Adams, 2009); indeed there are fundamental differences between the "reds" (Marxists) and the "greens" (ecologists). Concerns about the environment were incorporated into Marxist thought in the 1930’s through the work of dissident Marxists such as Walter Benjamin (Löwy, 2007). Eco-socialism as a distinct ideology was developed mainly during the last 30 years (Löwy, 2005) on the basis of the aforementioned ideological frameworks. The increasing impact of environmental issues and of ecological movements has definitely contributed to the crystallization of this ideology. Today the eco-socialist ideas are reflected in the ideology of green parties and the so-called "green-red movements" (Löwy, 2002).

Disciplinary embedding
Eco-socialism undoubtedly represents the most influential and advanced wing of the ecological camp (Löwy, 2002). Thanks to its sensitivity to the interests of the workers and the peoples of the South, it occupies a notable position in the field of social sciences (Wallis, 2001). Furthermore, it is noted by economists for its rejection of capitalist production methods within the framework of sustainable development (Löwy, 2002). Consequently, eco-socialism is also present in debates about the role of globalizing forces in the spread of capitalism and its detrimental practices (Garre, 2000, p. 35). It is no surprise that the political response in countries where the capitalist model prevails is to undermine anti-systemic movements and to prevent any effort to link production to environmental damage (Garre, 2000).
Key authors
Certain major thinkers over the last 25-30 years have played a role in the development of the core of eco-socialist ideas. Amongst others we can distinguish Raymond Williams who coined the term "eco-socialism" in his later writings, Rudolf Bahro who published "Building the green movement" in 1986, André Gorz who wrote "Capitalism-Socialism-Ecology" in 1994, and David Pepper who wrote "Eco-socialism: from deep ecology to social justice" in 1994 (Adams, 2009; Löwy, 2002). Useful contributions to the eco-socialist theoretical framework have also been provided by James O'Connor, Barry Commoner, John Bellamy Foster, Joel Kovel, Michael Löwy, Joan Martínez-Alier, Francisco Fernández Buey, Jorge Riechman, Jean-Paul Déléage, Jean-Marie Harribey, Elmar Altvater, Frieder Otto Wolf, and many others, who publish in journals like Capitalism Nature Socialism and Ecología Política.

Relevance to environment and sustainable development
Eco-socialism requires some conditions to be met in order for the ideology to realize its visions, such as the contraction of industrial economies towards a steady state (Bengtsson, 2002) and the resolution of class divisions to create a new mode of production (Garre, 2000, p. 29). This implies that continuing economic growth is not necessarily bad (Adams, 2009, p. 133), but that people need to lower their standard of living to a level that is a function of real social needs (Löwy, 2005). The necessary sacrifices should be born proportionally (Bengtsson, 2002).

According to eco-socialists the problem lies in the way the market functions. They accuse it of being narrowly irrational and they call for the "inauguration of a moral economy" (Löwy, 2002, p. 130), which leaves behind the fetishism of commodities and follows more environmentally-friendly consumption practices while taking into account the earth’s carrying capacity (Adams, 2009; Wallis, 2001, pp.137-138). The carrying capacity issue is an important aspect of the (mainstream) sustainable development paradigm as described by Adams, who stresses that “MSD…does recognize the possibility of biophysical limits within which the economy and global society function” (2009, p. 133).

Criticism
Eco-socialism has received criticism from socialists and conservatives as well as from environmentalists. A great part of the criticism concerns the socialist base of eco-socialism. It has been accused of being naive in its view that socialism can solve all problems (Adams, 2009, p. 180). Dordoy and Mellor (2009) add a new dimension to this criticism by referring to the productionist perspective that socialism, and hence eco-socialism, shares with capitalism. This perspective, according to them, results in economy and market values being the driving force of human society activities, which is not bad per se, but can result in the exacerbation of inequalities, especially gender-related. Furthermore, Pepper (1993, in Adams, 2009) has expressed his reservations about the apparently confusing cohabitation of Marxist and anarchist ideas in green thought, which in turn forms the basis of eco-socialism. Finally, Pepper rejects eco-socialists’ “enthusiasm for new social movements rather than labor as the basis for a revolution in both consciousness and material social relations” (Adams, 2009, p. 180).

References


