



Evaluating Covid 19 as a Tensional Space between Biocentric and Socio-ecological Trends

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Abstract

Amid the multifarious attempts made to interpret, investigate and evaluate the recent pandemic that has been globally witnessed, theoreticians and academicians have been more inclined towards widening the man and nature dichotomy. Recent developments in ecological studies has no doubt surmounted nature over man, with the heavy words like the Anthropocene and post human ecology gathering grounds rendering the sociological and the anthropological interpretations null and void.

This paper captures this tensional space hovering around the present pandemic and its absolute positioning of its generation and recuperations. It attempted to redeem such pandemics from its diluted interpretations modelled around the biocentric ecological theories and urged for a sociological approach which can provide a more holistic comprehension of the present crisis exposing the hegemonic manhandling of the biocentric theories by the first world countries to facilitate the exploitation of the third world countries.

The paper not only contributes to the unfolding of the political intrigues which are at work beneath the innocent dichotomic divisions between biotic and the abiotic elements in the environment but also opens up a new vistas for exploring newer path breaking way to reinterpret the situation the discourse of revolution has undergone.

Keywords

Marxism, deep ecology, biocentrism, social ecology, coronavirus

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic has been subjected to multiple social, political and theoretical debates. One of the central debates to which it has been exposed belongs to the ecological forum. The ecological platform seems to be undergoing some kind of polarization regarding the generative causes of the pandemic where the analogous relation of man and nature is placed at the forefront as the active agent stimulating the crisis confirming the existing model for evaluating such climatic or natural disasters. But the pandemic has introduced us to an altogether different dimension that invisibly looms larger in the present context. It is way beyond the polarization of the Man versus Nature scenario.

Where deep ecology with its lineage with the socially divorced Biocentric ecological theory heavily accused the human civilization of the present crisis, Social ecology endeavors to unfold the nuances and the intricacies which are at play focusing the divide between the first and the third world countries as a major agent behind the pandemic. The paper urges the readers to delve deeper into the political ramifications involved that may expose the bigger powers at play who have been gradually engineering the whole process of environmental destruction over decades. These are the forces that might have ignited the pandemic and worsened it for their personal interests. The founder of Social Ecology Murray Bookchin has quite accurately remarked in the article “Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology: Challenge for the Ecology Movement” that “today the newly emerging ecological movement is filled with well-meaning people who are riddled by a new kind of “spokesmen”, individuals who are selling their own wares – usually academic and personal careers.” To achieve its purpose the paper aligns its theoretical framework with Marxist ecology that challenges the detachment of deep ecology from sociology and the lethal self-sufficiency that it resorts to which denies a holistic view of the present crisis.

So the first task at hand is to get deeper into the cause of the pandemic. The popular notion concluded by putting the blame on the infamous wet markets of Wuhan, China from where the pandemic is being reported to be originating, and that’s probably true but as the reflection on the matter has evolved and new facts have surfaced in front of us, the main culprit according to many is not only the wet markets but the neoliberal forces that has been gradually engineering the whole process of environmental destruction over decades whose fruits we are bearing today, wet market and all are actually the minor actors in the entire game. As the entire human civilization has been accused of the pandemic then can we be indiscriminate? Can we blame the capitalist big brothers of the world and the poor working population of the third world countries in the same manner for the pandemic? Are they equally responsible? Or is it that the people of the third world countries are actually suffering or say bearing the fruits of the capitalist forces who could not probably anticipate what it resulted in today.

The paper shall be leading the discussion forward here within the framework of the most heated debate of ecological studies that is between social ecology and the deep ecology which is probably completely apt in the present context. The focus and the scope of the paper do not permit for an intense elaboration of these concepts but only a brief introduction of them in order to meet the purpose of the paper and carry the discussion

forward. The paper is divided here into three sections. First the difference between social ecology and deep ecology the tension between them has been elaborated, secondly, their conflicting roles in the context of the present pandemic is tried to be evaluated, and finally an attempt is made to investigate, why social ecology may win the game and is proved as the more instrumental approach towards the eradication of the present pandemic crisis.

The Conflicting Trends of Biocentric and Social Ecological Thoughts

A brief acquaintance is required to be undertaken with the struggle between these two prevailing trends of ecological thoughts. Deep ecology is presumed to be born in the hands of the Norwegian philosopher and ecologist, Arne Naess. In 1988 in the form of The Platform Principles, Naess propounded the eight basic principles of Deep Ecology. Since European Enlightenment and in fact, even before that, human beings occupied a privileged position on this earth which allowed them to exploit other nonhumans. Deep ecology believed that this is the central cause of environmental degradation. Deep ecology removed humans from their privileged position in relationship with the natural environment and advocates equality between humans and nonhumans which is termed later as '*bio-egalitarianism*'. But to the utter dismay, deep ecology has undergone major changes in terms of its principles, approaches, and aims since its inception by Arne Naess, receiving its most harsh criticism with the introduction of David Foreman's journal *Earth First* and his wholesale rejection "humanity is some kind of cancer in the world of life." (Bookchin, 1988)

Murray Bookchin on the other hand—the founder of social ecology has made some of the most extensive and relevant (as well as, at times, overly abrasive) critiques of deep ecology from a social and institutional standpoint, arguing that the present environmental crisis is not a product of the conflict between man and nature only but the result of the overambitious competitive nature of the capitalist countries and the exploitation of the third world countries.

Bookchin has strongly opined that the later developments that occurred in the field of Deep ecology denied any sort of association between environment and its roots lying in society. But what made Deep ecology fall out of the Favour? It is important to note deep ecology's failure at becoming a theory of social inclusivity. It has been analysed that Deep Ecology has been majorly a First World ecological thought that does not take the issues of the Third World countries into account. Ramchandra Guha, an eminent voice of Poor Environmentalism in his essay entitled "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique" has pointed out, "What is unacceptable are the radical conclusions drawn by deep ecology, in particular, that intervention in nature should be guided primarily by the need to preserve biotic integrity rather than by the needs of humans" (Guha, 2).

As Social ecology somewhere shares its connection with the Marxist ecology, in a very significant article entitled "Does Ecology need Marx" by Martha E. Gimenez, it is observed that 'It's high time to realize that how the biocentric ecological trends harbor "an abstract materialism which is inherent in their dominant ecological perspectives" (Gimenez p.296). And in such a situation to ensure that the benefits of environmental

conservation reach every person, Marxist ecology is actually the key. Though the Marxist philosophy has been excessively discredited by the ecologists in terms of its any redemptive role in environmental conservation, it's high time to revise our reading of Marx. A careful reading of the works of Marx and Engels would imply that Marxism has been very considerate about nature and influenced even Kautsky and Lenin in this regard. It can assist one to understand that victimization is not only of the proletariat but also of Nature altogether. The article primarily assists the argument here as one urgently needs to come out of the wholesale rejection of humanity popularized by the biocentric modes of ecology which is actually a conspiracy to blind one to the internal difference which will only be visible when the historicity of the condition is taken into account.

Therefore some amount of demystification in this regard is quite important. As argued in an article entitled, "Deep ecology meets the Developing World", James D. Nations, Director of Research, Center for Human Ecology, Austin, Texas remarked "Deep ecology is suitable only for dinner table discussions. The most pertinent question which needs to be asked here is who are the ultimate victims of this pandemic"(Nation, 1988). Given the lack of unity and presence of a comprehensive theory in deep ecology, many theorists in other fields of ecopolitical thought (radical and reformist) have critiqued a variety of aspects of the theory. Critiques have been made by theorists from liberal reform environmentalism, eco-socialism, ecofeminism, social ecology, or eco-anarchism, and from theorists directly concerned with environmental degradation in and inclusion of populations in the Global South.

Social ecology makes deep critiques of deep ecology, and on-going debates between the two theories still emerge today. Deep Ecology's constant attack on anthropocentrism as an enabler of environmental harm has not been logically justified enough which has further damaged its own viability as a radical ecopolitical theory. This calls for a re-evaluation, revision and reconstruction of the theoretical frameworks of the biocentric theories. Social Ecology in this regard has been primarily sceptical of deep ecologies disregard of the contributions done by the social and the anthropocentric theories in designing more ethical environmental policies. It has vehemently opposed the anthropocentric/ecocentric divide promoted by deep ecology which social ecology regarded as almost dysfunctional in addressing the major causes of ecological degradation and only serves to further alienate humans from Nature.

Tracing the Tension between Social and Deep Ecology in the context of Covid 19.

Now the tension between the two ecological trends with reference to Covid 19 needs to be traced. Under this section, the paper shall shed some light on the mechanism through which biocentric movements have assessed situations like pandemics and the outbreak of any virus in the human civilization. Christine J Cuomo points out in this regard:

Despite Naess's apparent benevolent sensibilities, the writings and recommendations of a number of Deep Ecologists have sometimes verged on the inhumane and others have put forth the view that phenomenon as the global aids epidemic and Third World famine are necessary solutions

to the population problem.” (Cuomo, ed, Kureethadam, Joshtrom Isaac, 159)

As Kyle Burchett Has pointed out that “if one were to adopt egalitarian biocentric axiology, one might be morally obligated to assist in expunging humanity from the Earth (as cited in Cuomo, 159). Bookchin in his critique of Deep Ecology has employed his deep sarcasm about David Enthrenfield’s s work “The Arrogance of Humanism” where Enthrenfield regarded Small Pox as an endangered species. In Bookchin’s words,

Such is the passion for perpetuating the ecosystem of every species, that one wonders how smallpox and AIDS virus should be preserved. In test tubes? Laboratory cultures? Or to be truly ecological, in their native habitat, the human body? (Bookchin, 1988)

This clearly substantiates the argument proposed in the paper regarding the wholesale rejection or annihilation of the humans that the biocentric ecologies constantly served as the antidote to the present crisis rendering humanism as null and void thus surrendering to posthumanism as the current day gospel.

In certain terms Covid 19 is an eye-opener to this situation of how ecofascism and ecobrutality came into play. The primary trend that is dominating the situation of the eco-fascist attitude of the biggest economic powers of the contemporary times is simply to put the blame of the entire situation on the third world countries their heightened population, one of the primary policies of the Big Brothers in the first world countries.

According to the social ecologists, environmental destruction is not a product of the human-nature dichotomy, rather it is because of the binary between the rich and the poor, the capitalists and the socialists, The first world and the third world countries. So before making the blind approach of denouncing humanity in general we need to investigate its true cause. It may probably sound like a too farfetched comment here to say that Posthuman ecology and to a great extent deep ecology itself provides the Big Capitalists power of the world as a tool to disguise the truth that the present situation is a product of their deliberate designing which has very deceptively rescued them every time. The kind of ideal spacing that deep ecology, an American brand of ecocriticism and to an extent posthumanism creates is not at all accountable when it comes to the socio-economic dimensions that is so much a rooted and predominant aspect of the Third world environmentalism. So this pandemic situation though global cannot be evaluated and treated uniformly equivocally. Neoliberal politics has necessitated this strong divide in the estimation of the entire situation. In an article entitled “COVID-19: What has COVID-19 Taught us about Neoliberalism?” it has been quite absolutely remarked in this regard that:

In the midst of the pandemic, the full scope of the effects of neoliberalism is being revealed. Not all countries and regions will be affected the same. Not all people will be affected the same. The ability to isolate, work from home, homeschool your children, stockpile your shelves, access healthcare, and financially (and psychologically) put your life back together after the pandemic is class, gender, race, age, and geography dependent. (Isaković)

Since the trend of privatization has overtaken the world it has increased the rift between the haves and the have not's. So from the perspective of the Third World countries what will be the more suitable approach here to think of a socio-economic people-oriented approach or to just contemplate upon the post-humanist meditations and celebrating their prediction of the world reaching this posthumanist stage. The ultimate question which needs to be asked here is how competent are the post-humanist theories in the resolution of the contemporary environmental crisis especially in the context of third world countries. Or should we resort back to the social-ecological theories?

In an Interview with *The Wire*, regarding the present crisis, Noam Chomsky, the famous linguist and political activist noted for his critiques of neoliberalism, imperialism, and the military-industrial-media complex opined that “the overriding lesson of the coronavirus pandemic is that the crisis represents another colossal failure of the neoliberal version of capitalism” (Jipson & Jithesh). In the same article entitled, “The Pandemic Has Only Exposed the Suicidal Tendencies of Capitalism: Noam Chomsky” published in *The Wire*, it has been aptly observed that:

It's very obvious what happened. After the SARS epidemic in 2003, the scientists knew perfectly well that there were other pandemics coming, probably of the coronavirus variety. It would have been possible to prepare at that point. Pretty much the way it's done with flu. You have a new flu vaccine every year because there are slight variations, but you're ready for it so you produce it quickly. It wasn't done. Someone has to pick up the ball and run with it. There are two possibilities. Drug companies: they have the resources, they're super-rich because of the gifts we lavish on them. They won't do it. They observe market signals. Market signals tell you there's no profit to be made in preparing for catastrophe down the road. (Jipson & Jithesh)

Social-Ecological Approach as the need of the hour.

The Indian Express in the present context of the pandemic has come up with a vital article “Reading Marx in the Times of Corona” where Thomas L Friedman has written that “COVID-19 is a black elephant. It is the logical outcome of our increasingly destructive wars against nature”. The emerging situation is likely to be a matter of much public debate in which Karl Marx and Marxism will occupy centre stage.

Marx and Engels analysed the dialectics of nature. They pointed out how harmony among people, land, water, and air leads to changes. In *Das Capital*, Marx explained that “labour is in the first place a process in which both man and nature participate”. Marx went on to explain that the labour process was nothing but the production process. One very significant point made by Engels which aptly fits the present context of Covid 19 is this. In this regard the article “Reading Marx in the times of Covid 19” in *The Indian Express* captures Engels' words which aptly justifies the argument:

the poor districts in which the workers are crowded together are the breeding places of all those epidemics which from time to time afflict out towns. Cholera, typhus, typhoid fever, smallpox, and other ravaging

diseases spread their germs in the pestilential air and the poisoned water of these working-class quarters. (D. Raj)

The present situation can simply remind one of Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*. The novel in certain terms share concerns equivalent to that of the present pandemic crisis as it projects the harsh conditions and exploited lives in the United States in Chicago and similar industrialized cities. This simply resonates with the wet markets of China and the vulnerability of such places that encourage the transmission of such viruses like the Corona Virus from the nonhuman to the human body. Sinclair's novel also primarily emphasizes the need for the implementation and advancement of socialism which he believed can eradicate such problems as the health violations and unsanitary practices in the American meatpacking industry during the early 20th century, which greatly contributed to a public outcry that led to reforms including the Meat Inspection Act.

Coronavirus and viruses of these kinds are actually transmitted from the nonhuman bodies to the human bodies because of the proximity between the two for which the farmers the miners are to be blamed. But what alternative is left for these people? And then the question comes that who is to be blamed humans indiscriminately or our economic configuration that exploited both nature and the fellow powerless human beings equally?

According to another newspaper article “Whom do u blame for the Pandemic” framing the pandemic simplistically as a public health crisis — one that was caused by strange eating habits of people in faraway places — suits the neoliberal economic narrative. The author of this article has beautifully pointed out the capitalist hypocrisy where acts of environmental destruction flourished under the name of development and progress whereas acts for subsistence consumption by the poor strata of the society for the purpose of survival is demonized as environmentally threatening. A few lines from the article will substantiate the argument here:

They have excelled in passing the buck on to the smallest actors at the outer edges of the economic machinery, with allies among a certain brand of largely urban conservationists and animal rights activists. The clear-felling of entire forests is a legitimate economic endeavour in this worldview while collecting firewood for subsistence is portrayed as a threat to the environment. Large-scale aqua-culture that lay waste to entire landscapes with their introduced salinity are alright but artisanal fisheries are deemed over-exploitative. Oil palm and soy plantations in rainforests are couched in the language of development and progress, but shifting cultivation by a few communities is singled out as a major threat to the planet. (Paul & Vanak , 2020)

One British political scientist even predicts “coronavirus might make socialists of us all,” (qtd in San Juan, p.2). At the very least, even capitalists emphasize that “(t)he Covid-19 crisis is a chance to do capitalism differently”(qtd in San Juan, p.2). The great scientist Albert Einstein (2009) – who was a socialist – believed that:

through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals” society’s “grave evils” could be eliminated, and that under such socialist

framework, “(t) the education of the individual, in addition to promoting his own innate abilities, would attempt to develop in him a sense of responsibility for his fellow-men in place of the glorification of power and success in our present society. (qtd in San Juan, p.13)

Such is the holistic and integrated approach that humanity requires to combat the crisis.

Conclusion

One major question that occupies the centre stage now is the viability of the sociological theories as the absolute alternative to the biocentric counterparts. How to advocate socialism which is reduced to nothing less than a mutual conspiracy of Capitalism and authoritarian communism as witnessed in some countries of the world. The answer to this has been provided by one of the eminent philosophers of the 21st century and that is Slavoj Žižek. In his recent book entitled *Pandemic* Žižek has proposed the model of ‘New Communism’ as the antidote for the present crisis. This humanitarian model of New Communism is devoid of the flaws imbibed in the existing communist economies and is much different from 20th-century communism. In his own words “on account of our efforts to save humanity from self-destruction, we are creating a new kind of humanity.” When he was charged with entrenching a communist viewpoint under the cover of pandemic Žižek answers to *The Times of Israel* “I am not talking about Old school communism of 20th century. Nor am I talking about a new utopian form of Government”.

The same newspaper observes Philosopher Bruno Latour’s remarks in the present context:

the present health crisis is not rooted in its own independent crisis but rather is a part of continuing and irreversible process of ecological change. The final word of the day that can provide us with some sort of respite is nothing else than humanism. Not its Enlightenment brand that dehumanized the female and the people of the colonized countries and objectified Nature, but an evolved form of renewed humanism. (Hadar)

What the bio-centric ecologists attempted to undertake is establishing the irrelevancy and the impotency of the notion of humanism and the non-human [post-human] towering over the call for humanism. Humanity as Bookchin has asserted according to the Deep ecologists is an ‘ugly “anthropocentric” thing’. (Bookchin, 1988). The paper thus criticizes the imposition of the fascist discourses by the first world countries globally over the third world nations without considering the struggle that these people undergo on the sociological fronts. What basically the paper attempted to accomplish is the need for expunging the toxic modes of capitalism urging the readers to acknowledge the urgency of embracing a socialist design to eradicate the present crisis.

It attempts to substantiate the urgency of incorporating the socio-ecological theories to address the multiple dimensions of the present pandemic. Perhaps, the antidote to the pandemic does not lie in amplifying the dichotomic distance between man and nature rather it lies in fostering an integrated method that acknowledges the victimization of both the biotic as well as the abiotic agents. Pandemics like Covid 19 are the ultimate resultant product of such shared victimization. The eradication of the natural and the

climatic disorders lies in acknowledging the political and economic differences between the first and the third world countries followed by a promise of the conservation of nature resulting into the wellbeing of the human civilization instead of their wholesale rejection and boycott from the ecosystem. Marx's famous quote is quite apt amid the present crisis "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it".

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