

Where's the Revolution in Democratic Confederalism's "Ecology"?

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Since 1992, when the UN's Rio Declaration on Environment and Development¹ established the concept of "sustainable development" in international law,² it has been commonplace for seemingly everyone from national governments, multinational corporations, local municipalities, international development institutions, commercial banks, shadow banks and even the military to claim that environmental concerns are taken into account in all their operations.

Infrastructure projects – from roads to new housing and power plants – are now required to have environmental impact assessments. Numerous laws and regulations now dictate what wastes may be produced and what waste may not, how goods may be packaged, what happens to the packaging and how our wastes are dealt with (or not). Pesticides are "regulated". International Treaties have been signed to conserve the albatross, to protect small crustaceans in the Baltic, to ensure access to environmental information and to curb emissions of climate change-inducing chemicals.

So why should we get excited by the declaration that "ecology" is central to the Kurdish project of Democratic Confederalism?

Is this just the Kurds catching up with the rest of the world?

Or does the Kurdish movement's approach to "ecology" – when taken together with the commitments to participatory democracy, opposing capitalist forms of production and exchange, and challenging patriarchy – promise something more revolutionary?

¹ http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/RIO_E.PDF

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1127rioprinciples.pdf>

I believe that it does; but that realising this revolutionary potential will require more – much more – than adopting environmental impact assessments or recycling schemes or solar collectors.

Indeed a focus on these technical responses to environmental degradation – necessary and important as they may be – is likely to hamper and even threaten what is revolutionary about the Kurdish movement’s approach to ecology.

For me, that revolutionary potential lies does not in the recognition of “ecology” as a pillar of democratic confederalism (let us not forget how often “ecology” been used by authoritarian or conservative social movements to “naturalise” extremely sexist and racist social orders) but in the Kurdish movement’s insistence – well articulated by Stephen Hunt in a recent article in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* – that respect for plurality, if it is to mean anything, must extend beyond the human realm to embrace the multiplicity of non-human forms of life on which all life depends for its collective survival.³

To pay more than lip-service to that recognition – to actualise it through practice – would indeed be transformational.

For, if taken seriously, the recognition that humans are part of nature and not separate from it – and that all forms of life have a right to existence – sets a trajectory that is radically opposed to that of mainstream environmentalism.

To be sure, such environmentalism stresses how “we” all share one planet and the interdependence of life forms. The message is clear enough: we cannot treat the planet as, to quote Joel Marks, “our private goldmine or garbage dump”.⁴

But the gravitational pull of centuries of Cartesian thought and capitalist practice – from which mainstream environmentalism does not seek to break free – is relentlessly anthropocentric.

For mainstream environmentalists, the environment is what surrounds “us” – and the “us” is human. The relationship that matters here is the relations of humans to other forms of life. It is our survival that is the litmus test, not the survival of theirs.

³ Stephen E. Hunt (2017), “Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology”, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1413120>

⁴ Joel Marks, “Whose environment is it?” [https://philosophynow.org/issues/66/Whose Environment Is It](https://philosophynow.org/issues/66/Whose_Environment_Is_It)

To reject that anthropocentrism is to enter unfamiliar territory for most of us.

It sets the project of Democratic Confederalism on a path that rejects the notion that nature and human society are separate and opposing spheres.

It asks us to take seriously – though our practice – the conclusion reached by Timothy Morton in his book *Ecology without Nature*; namely that “the very idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society”.⁵

It challenges the view that holds humans to be stewards of nature – a formulation that is axiomatic not only for continued capitalist accumulation but for many vanilla “alternatives” to capitalism – and instead seeks a collaboration between all forms of life in the interests of their common survival.

It raises questions about how non-humans are to be accorded meaningful representation in our discussions about our collective survival. Is “Nature” to be represented through “experts”? Or through daily actions that develop a new conversation with the natural world?

It insists on recognising the agency not only of humans but of non-human nature – and to recognise that “nature” is always co-produced.

It invites us to broaden our view of what constitutes the political and to take seriously not only the power relations between and among humans but also the power relations between and among humans and non-humans.

And it demands that we are relentless in bring this expanded notion of the political into our practice and our theorising.

How might our notions of “justice” be changed if we treated the oppression of non-humans as seriously as the oppression of humans?

What new inequalities might we become aware of?

And how would that change our practices and concepts of what constitutes solidarity?

⁵ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

And what implications might this have for struggles to defend, reclaim and expand the commons – that organisation of social life that insists, through daily practice, on the collective right of all, not just the few, to survival?

How might our view of “the collective right of all to survival” change if we took seriously the agency of non-humans and their role in the co-production of nature?

How might that shift our view of what constitutes labour?

And how might greater attention to the unpaid labour of non-humans assist our understanding of how value is created for capital?

And how might this inform our critiques of contemporary capitalism, particularly as it moves further to enclose the natural world through extracting new forms of rent from environmental services?

How might an expanded notion of labour change our view of class? In the same way that the focus of radical feminists on the unpaid work of women in social reproduction has expanded our notion of the labour beyond factory labour?

These are not easy questions.

And I know from my own experience that they are hard to get one’s head around when the dualisms of nature/society keep getting in the way.

I am aware how often I have myself lapsed into Cartesian thinking and categories whilst trying to reject and dismantle them even in this short talk.

But some ways forward suggest themselves.

One is to engage more closely with indigenous and other social movements who do not view the world through the lens of a nature/culture divide. A starting point might be the social movements in Latin America who have been engaged for decades in a vibrant debate over the “rights of nature”, now enshrined in at least one national constitution.

Excavating the history of how “nature/society” dualisms arose – whose interests they serve, how they have been resisted and by whom – might also help, not only in liberating us from the vocabularies and practices that limit our ability to reconceptualise our relationships with the natural world but also in identifying the many traps that such dualism create for any radical interpretation of “ecology”.

Insisting on politicising the vocabularies that we use to discuss the “environment” is also surely axiomatic, not just in bringing out the many and varied conflicts between different human actors that are obscured by even seemingly innocent words like “water” or “forests” – how a forest is conceived by the accountancy department of a multinational is very different from how it is viewed by a forest dweller – but also in identifying where and how the interests of non-human actors are hidden.

I will leave it there. Hopefully we can discuss these questions further in the debate that follows.

Suffice it to say that the proof of the revolutionary potential of Democratic Confederation’s “ecology” will depend critically on how its expanded notions of “plurality” are put into practice through everyday action not on how “plurality” is treated in the abstract.

But of one thing I am certain: to give all forms of life a seat at the decision-making table – and to treat their interests equally – would indeed be revolutionary.