

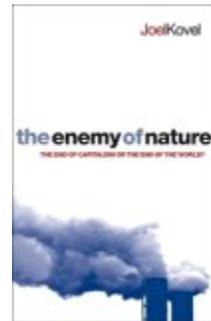
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joel Kovel. *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* New York: Zed Books, 2002. xiii + 274 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84277-081-8; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84277-080-1.

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Joel Kovel has written a challenging and compelling book. If the subtitle suggests that it is simply an addition to the growing volume of texts from or about the United States written in a sub-millenarian mode, this would be to seriously mislead potential readers. Not only does Kovel approach his subject from the perspective of a self-questioning socialist rather than a self-righteous Christian but also his tone is serious and sober rather than fulminatory and fevered. Not that this is a work without a significant degree of passion or even moments of poetic insight, but both serve his central objective which is to document what he sees as the world's slide to global destruction and to identify possible alternatives to such an outcome. That this involves a global perspective, which some may find unconvincing, and the search for a political alternative, that others may consider implausible, is the source of the book's challenging and compelling qualities.

Joel Kovel's previous work has been concerned with the political implications of psychoanalysis and the experience of the left in Central America in the 1980s, specifically the fortunes of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Both inform this new text, but here the concern is with the development of an eco-socialist perspective on the world and a politics which could give expression to such a viewpoint. This search for a new way of thinking and doing politics is, no doubt, reinforced by Kovel's own attempts to engage with the political process; he has run on the Green Party ticket in elections for the U.S. Senate in 1998 and for the Presidency in 2000. Unsuccessful in both cases, some of the book involves a polemic with fellow Greens about the most appropriate strategy and perspective for the movement, but it is much more than a

text occasioned by intra-party squabbles. Kovel's targets are altogether broader and his objectives more profound.

Kovel is especially concerned to challenge the blinkered views and aspirations of both right and left, the former engaging in a mind-numbing celebration concerning capitalism's achievements, the latter in a mind-closing narrowness as to capitalism's alternatives. In pursuit of these goals, the text falls into three clearly defined but linked sections. In the first Kovel seeks to identify the causes of what he sees as a world-threatening ecological crisis. The second, and most theoretically challenging, develops what he calls a "philosophy of nature and human nature" (p. 8), while the third and final section seeks to address the famous question which has haunted the left during the last century or more: "what is to be done?" While many may find grounds for disagreement with Kovel's analysis and his answers, nobody can fail to be impressed by the seriousness and conviction which he brings to the formidable task he has set himself.

This passion is in the fore in the first section. Here Kovel presents an angry but well-documented account of the dimensions of the ecological crisis which he sees as the result of capitalism in its latest expansive phase, the so-called globalization which he considers no more than a new phase of the imperialism inherent in capitalism's tendency to expand into and invade all areas hitherto beyond its reach. He powerfully, and often movingly, documents capitalism's invasive qualities—the image of the virus or cancerous growth is employed throughout—in terms of human experiences, spatial and temporal awareness, and the institutional regimes of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO which seek to impose market norms

and extend capitalism's sway. In making what he calls, at the end of this section, his "indictment" (pp. 82-83), he draws on the work of writers like James O'Connor and David Harvey, while the spirit of Jean Baudrillard seems to lurk in some of his observations concerning the hyper-reality evident in contemporary capitalism's symbolic economy. Using the disaster at Bhopal as a metaphor for the global destructiveness of contemporary corporate capitalism, Kovel mounts a case as compelling as it is intense for the ecological disaster now underway. He is especially powerful in his denunciation of the apologists for contemporary capitalism, whose amnesia concerning the ecological problems identified as recently as the 1970s and triumphalism concerning the economic achievements of capitalism in the mid- and late 1990s (p. 45) he finds equally incredible.

In the second section Kovel adopts a more philosophical and reflective mode. Drawing on perspectives from the physical and psychological sciences he seeks to define an ecological awareness and practice which could, and in his opinion must, provide an alternative to the ecological destruction he has described in part 1. Developing the important distinction between the environment and an ecology—the former being seen as outside us, while the latter is a "whole defined by internal relations," including human activity and relations—introduced early in the book (p. 17), Kovel seeks to identify the conditions capable of sustaining the "integrity of an ecosystem," which is a process of differentiation amongst the elements comprising an ecosystem that, nevertheless, remain related through "a state of being that preserves both individuality and connectedness" (pp. 105-106). In contrast, capitalism involves processes which split off the different elements of what should be treated as a whole and subordinates human and natural productivity—the two should be seen as inseparable argues Kovel—to the imperatives of capital accumulation. Employing a Marxist method, which is central to his analysis, Kovel argues (in Marxist terms) that use value predominates over exchange and that ecological wholeness can only be restored by the progressive, and ultimately revolutionary, reversal of that relationship.

In his final section Kovel turns to the politics of that reversal. Here he polemicizes with various currents of ecological or green thinking—deep, feminist, and capitalist—which he considers to be marred by reformist illusions concerning the dynamic of capital or populist optimism concerning the forces that might challenge it. Kovel does not, however, simply assert as an alternative a Marxist politics in either of its twentieth-century modes—

social democracy or "Leninism." (While not unsympathetic to some of Lenin's philosophizing, he discounts any serious difference between his or Trotsky's politics and those of Stalin; neither an enfeebled labor movement nor a discredited state can sustain such a politics on its own.) Kovel envisages a broader type of popular action, one which seeks to wrest control of the productive process through initiatives on many fronts. This would include movements not only in the economy—cooperative production and distribution—but also in the social and political spheres, involving activities as diverse as new modes of educational provision, the formation of pressure groups and even an Eco-socialist party. Through processes involving both ideological critique (transforming beliefs) and social action ("ecological ensembles" as "islands within the capitalist sea" [p. 225]), the hegemony of exchange value over use value can be progressively reversed until there occurs what Kovel sees as the ultimate and necessary revolutionary transformation to an eco-socialist society.

Kovel moves to these conclusions in a manner which is as inspirational as it is urgent. Writing, as he notes, between the Seattle protests of 1999 and the events of September 2001, his text stands between the renewed optimism of the anti-globalization movement and the "grim shadow" of "terror and ecological destruction" which he sees reflected in the destruction of September 11 (pp. xii-xiii). From the perspective of the summer of 2003, that grim shadow has now acquired a more malign character following a war whose origins, in part, can be traced to the infernal liquid which drives so much of our current ecological disorder—what Kovel calls the "regime of oil" (p. xiii). But it would be wrong to let current pre-occupations, however urgent and desperate, obscure the broader significance of Kovel's work. Toward the end of his life, the historian, peace campaigner, and increasingly green (although perhaps no longer Marxist) E. P. Thompson observed that his own writings on the popular customs of the eighteenth century were undertaken in part to show that there had been an alternative way of life to that which industrial capitalism had installed in the last two centuries—that human values could trump exchange values. In writing thus Thompson, perhaps at a moment of personal and political despair, argued that such evidence as he had gathered might inspire others in the future to seek alternative ways of thinking and acting, although he admitted that to many it might seem as forlorn as "spitting into a typhoon." If Kovel's work sometimes seems to be written in the eye of the storm, and if he too displays moments of doubt and despair before the

enormity of the challenge, there can be no higher praise be seen as carrying forward Thompson's ambition. for his book than that, in spirit and substance, it can fairly

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