Re-thinking well-being in radical politics today

Mary Mellor

Introduction

Most traditional socialist movements have shared with capitalism the aim of progress through the industrialisation of production. By the late twentieth century capitalism had virtually annihilated the left through its seeming potential for unlimited growth and the promise of 'people's capitalism' through widespread personalized investment and finance. Movements based on organized labour found themselves fractured in the face of a ruthless global capitalism. Radical politics of the centre left moved to the periphery of capitalist globalization in the green movement and a range of anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation struggles and alternative life-styles. While politically these movements have remained fairly marginalized their ideas have begun to gain ground. The green movement in particular from the 1970s onwards has put the ecological question on to the mainstream agenda even if green parties have not been able to translate this into substantial blocks of votes. Following the puncturing of capitalist hubris by the financial crisis and the willingness of the American public to embrace change in the election of Barack Obama it seems there is a new opportunity for radical politics. I want to argue that

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within the green, anti-globalisation and life-style movements there are a number of themes that offer a radical alternative.

The broad thrust of the green movement has been the challenge to human societies to meet their needs without damaging the planet and the habitat of other species. This by itself is a radical challenge to existing socio-economic structures, particularly global capitalism. However a radical challenge also demands indications of an alternative. A number of approaches have emerged around sustainable economic structures and different ways of living that could form the basis of an ecologically sustainable and socially just society.

The green movement is a broad church. While its green challenge is radical, this is not necessarily associated with radical social politics. There are many greens who are comfortable with social inequality and there are some extreme viewpoints that think nature would be better off without humans. However the green movement has also produced political and social movements that embrace a wide range of radical perspectives: ecofeminists, green socialists, socialist greens, green anarchists. Newspapers, books, magazines and academic journals such as Capitalism, Nature, Socialism reflect these new ideas and synergies. In this paper I will explore some of the radical ideas that have emerged within the green agenda over the past thirty years.

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Radical political space: the green challenge

For all greens industrialized mass production and consumption on a globalised scale cannot prevail. There are reformist positions that seek to tax, regulate and trade in various ways to maintain business as usual as far as possible. For radical greens ecological sustainability is incompatible with large scale productive processes particularly where they are based on self-interest, greed and money-based valuation. On this basis the growth dynamic of both capitalism and industrialism is challenged. An economistic approach to environmental problems is also rejected. The natural world and its processes are seen as having intrinsic value (beauty, irreplacability etc.) which can never be calculated in money terms. Even if the damage done could be calculated in money terms, in most cases this damage would be 'externalised' that is, not taken account of in economic calculations. However, even if there was an aim to internalise ecological costs these cannot be anticipated or measured in the long term.

Ecosocialists acknowledge this dilemma but unlike greens see ecological destruction as being mainly the result of capitalist production and exchange which treats the environment as a free resource or as exploitable private property. Resources that should be seen as the common right of all are harnessed for profit or for private benefit. The damaging consequences are borne by economically powerless communities (those who live near polluting

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factories or toxic dumps) or who have their traditional resources privatised. Ecosocialists argue that environmental degradation brings a contradiction for capitalism. As it exploits natural resources capitalism undermines its own ecological viability eventually undermining its capacity to operate profitably, or at all. This has been described by James O'Connor as a 'second contradiction' for capital[1]. Ecological limits also make the case for private ownership and control of resources much more difficult to make. In a limited system whoever controls resources automatically denies others the possibility of ownership or access and therefore raises issues of socio-economic justice and how responsibly a resource is used.

Ecofeminism emerged in the mid 1970s alongside the wider green movement. There are many varieties of ecofeminism, some of which see an essential or mystical affinity of women with nature. The prevalence of this approach in the early days led to some cynicism about ecofeminism within more traditional radical movements. Over time a more socially based approach developed that saw a material connection between environmental degradation and women's subordination[2]. Variously described as socialist, social or materialist ecofeminists, they see the ecological problem as wider than capitalism and/or

[1] J. O'Connor (1996) The Second Contradiction of Capitalism (in) T. Benton (Ed) *The Greening of Marx*, New York: Guilford.

[2] M. Mellor (1997) *Feminism and Ecology*, Cambridge: Polity.

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industrialism. They argue that modern economies are so destructive because they have lost touch with the overall reality of human existence in nature. This is because the relationship between humanity and nature is gendered. Capitalism and industrialism, compounded by patriarchy, create economies that are disembedded from local communities, local environments and from the whole of human daily life and life cycle.

Ecofeminists argue that modern industrialized and commodified economies are fundamentally gendered in a way that externalises the life of the body, together with the rest of nature. As a result of this gendered division of labour, activities that represent only a very partial aspect of human existence have become the driving force and focus of economic life. Profit based economies only want exploitable labour and take no responsibility for the rest of the human life cycle. From this perspective the so-called wealth-creating 'economy' is parasitical on the regeneration and renewal capacity of the environment, unpaid work in homes and communities mainly done by women, socially provided infrastructure and laws and the accumulated work and knowledge of previous generations.

From this perspective it is argued that ecologically sustainable societies must always take account of the whole in their theory and practice: all human activities, the whole life, the whole process from creation to destruction. This would take seriously the life and care of the body, traditionally represented as

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women's work and take socialism, in particular, beyond its productivist obsession with the formal (patriarchal/capitalist) economy. The main aim would be to broaden the concept of economic activity to include work that is underpaid or unpaid. Community work and domestic work would therefore be seen as part of the whole package of social provisioning. The breakdown of the commodified boundary would imply that the privileged rewards of the formal economy would need to be opened up or abandoned.

This perspective in ecofeminism has been supported by the emergence of feminist economics which has launched its own challenge to patriarchal economics. This has sought to breakdown the conventional view of the economy through adopting the concept of provisioning to describe the economy in its widest sense. Provisioning embraces both paid and unpaid work and a wide range of activities, from love and care to food, shelter and social and leisure activities. The concept also opens up a distinction between wants and needs, and helps to focus economic decision-making on the needs of human beings in all aspects of their lives. In meeting human needs the environment is also seen as a provisioning system and there is necessarily a conflict between human needs, the needs of other species and the need of the environment to re-provision itself. Feminist and ecofeminist thinking stands in radical challenge to conventional economic thinking and to much left thinking around the economy. It demands a fundamental recognition of the

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gendered nature of economic systems and the need to balance the demands of humanity and non human nature.

Sustainable solutions?

Green solutions have ranged from a return to subsistence or self-provisioning economies, through local or appropriate scale economies, to market solutions such as trading pollution permits [3]. There is a demand that economies should be socially and environmentally embedded. Often there is an aim to re-craft people for more self-provisioning and to use local resources that are seasonally available. For many green thinkers local communities including indigenous peoples in subsistence economies are seen as closer to nature and therefore to understanding what is sustainable and what is not. Sometimes there is an implicit or explicit model of knowledge at work that sees modern science and technology as having developed a false understanding of the dynamics of the natural world and of human interaction with it. Arguably this sometimes goes too far in privileging traditional knowledge over recently created knowledge, given that some traditional societies have been ecologically destructive. However, it is certainly true that a wider judgement has to be made about the relevance and sustainability of all forms of

[3] M. Woodin and C. Lucas (2004) *Green Alternatives to Globalisation*, London: Pluto.

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knowledge and there is need for much more humility about human capabilities.

A major problem for more localist and implicitly rural green approaches to ecological sustainability is that the tipping point has already passed where the majority of the world's population is now urban. While we can have great sympathy with the many green experiments in rural living and local provisioning, often based on co-operative structures or local money or local exchange, radical solutions will need to be found that can provision on a mega-city basis. This would require an economic system that can meet human needs on a mass scale without requiring a constant expansionary dynamic. To achieve this would mean that people who have built their lives and culture on high levels of consumption will need to do with much less, particularly if other species are to survive. The key principle must be sufficiency, consumption on the basis of need not greed.

Re-thinking the economy

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Although economic thinking in the past thirty years has been dominated by the triumphalism of neo-classical economics, a lot of radical thinking has been emerging in and around the green agenda. Two main concerns have been resource use and the dynamics of the financial system, particularly the growth dynamic inherent in speculative finance and debt. Much of this thinking has been linked to organisations such as TOES (The Other Economic Summit) and the New Economics Foundation which were established in the mid 1980s. Since then activists and radical academics have addressed a range of topics including criticising economic growth and conventional economic analysis, developing new indicators of economic health and sustainability, analysing women's work, re-defining wealth and work to put needs before profit, making the case for local and social economies, bringing lessons in sustainability from around the world and responding to the financial crisis.

Some of the new thinking has addressed the nature of money and the changing role of the banking system[4]. One substantial change is in the way money is issued and circulated. An important state privilege has been almost entirely privatised and arguably this has led directly to the current debt-based crisis. States have historically claimed the privilege to issue money and take the benefit of what is known as 'seigniorage', that is first use of that money. Most money was fiat money issued at low cost made from paper and base

[4] F. Hutchinson, M. Mellor & W. Olsen (2002) *The Politics of Money: Towards Sustainability and Economic Democracy*, London: Pluto, p63).

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metal (the idea of a gold base to money was always largely an illusion). In the last few decades this right has been given away to the private sector through the use of credit as the main form of money issue. Only 3% of money is now issued as notes and coin in the UK. Commercial trade has also issued money as credit historically, but even as late as 1950 the balance of state and commerce in money issue was roughly 50:50. The importance of state money as note and coin was that it was issued without debt and could be used directly to finance public expenditure.

Money critics point out that bank debt money, like fiat money, is effectively conjured out of thin air by the commercial banks through the process known as fractional reserve banking. However unlike fiat money it has to be repaid. As early as 1963 James Tobin referred to bank created credit as 'fountain pen money' and in 1975 John Kenneth Galbraith commented that 'the process by which banks create money is so simple that the mind is repelled. Where something so important is involved, a deeper mystery seems only decent.'[5]. In recent times this 'magic well' of money has been used by speculative companies involved in hedge betting, mergers and acquisitions, privatisations and various other kinds of speculative investment as well as by private individuals and the government. The result of the shift to almost entirely debt-based money issue and circulation has been clearly seen in massive

[5] F. Hutchinson, M. Mellor & W. Olsen (2002) *The Politics of Money: Towards Sustainability and Economic Democracy*, London: Pluto, p63.

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personal indebtedness and booms such as hugely inflated house values that leave only the debt when house prices collapse.

The political impact of the current crisis is enhanced given the extent to which large swathes of the general population have had their financial expectations dashed. The financialisation of social life has led to widespread involvement in what would historically have involved only richer parts of the community. People have been encouraged to turn their savings into capital through stock market investments via banks and pension schemes. Houses are treated as assets rather than homes. Consumers have been urged to buy on credit or to re-mortgage homes to 'release equity'. It is true that in previous crises the mass of the population was directly affected through unemployment, but they had not been ideologically co-opted in the same way as people who have been seduced into 'people's capitalism'. The capacity for disillusionment on the part of those who thought they had 'made it' provides huge political space for radical movements of the left but also, unfortunately, for the populist right.

The radical critique of money/credit argues that those who have control over, or access to, the money-creation process can also enhance their ownership and control over the means and direction of production. It is therefore vital that a radical politics should argue for the democratic control of money issue. This will not of itself challenge existing patterns of economic ownership and control, but it open up the potential to change the direction of the economy. The argument is

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made that money/credit that can be conjured out of thin air should be treated as a 'Commons', that is, something that should belong to everyone, like air itself. It is a central principle for greens and green socialists that Commons (water, land, resources) are a common right (including for other species) and should be under democratic control. Democratic decisions about the use of Commons resources are likely to prioritise social expenditure and public goods and hopefully recognise the rights of nonhuman life. In the case of new money issue, this could be channelled directly to the poor, or to everyone, as a Citizen's Income, or used for social investment. Socially controlled organisations such as co-operatives, LETS, time banks could be given preference as could public sector expenditure. The private sector, if it still existed, would work with money already circulated.

Radical political space: Human well being

A major area of concern linked to green issues is the issue of personal well being. This thinking has gone into the mainstream where there are numerous self-help and alternative therapy books. Much of this is just another form of consumerism and ME-ism that is unlikely to form the basis of a radical politics. However a concern with well-being when it is directed towards the quality of life of others and not oneself is arguably very important for radical politics. What the well being thinkers argue is that capitalism defines wealth

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only in money terms and therefore demands a pace and style of life that does not allow for quality of environment, contemplation, life or craft. In its place greens have emphasized right livelihood understood as quality of life, joy in work and sufficiency. In unequal societies this can only be a life-style choice for the better off. A radical politics would aim to create ecologically sustainable socially just economies that could enable everyone to enjoy quality of life and peace of mind.

One area of green thinking that traditional socialists may be more uncomfortable with is a view of nature that embodies mystical or spiritual elements, seeing a 'mind' of nature or expressing nature reverence. While this kind of thinking would seem inimical to a practical radical politics it is perhaps tapping something that a lot of people feel. Even without mystical overtones many (most?) people feel something resembling awe in the presence of natural forces such as rivers, mountains or trees. Illness and death are also important human concerns and people need space to address these issues. Green approaches are very much imbued with images of the cycle of life and replenishment and this is often reflected, for example, in green burials and humanist funerals that express loss in the same way as part of the cycle of life.

Conclusion

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This paper argues that radical ideas have been developing around the environment, the economy and human wellbeing over the past twenty to thirty years. Not all of these ideas imply a left position, but arguably they could inspire and possibly invigorate traditional left political thinking. It is widely acknowledged that there is an environmental crisis and a financial crisis is already upon us. Radical thinking is taking place around the economy and the need to develop human societies that are socially just and ecologically sustainable. This starts from the need to minimize human impact on natural resources not only to secure the future of humanity, but also the viability of other species. It is argued that economic systems need to be developed that embrace the whole of human lives including their interaction with the environment within a system that enables collective responsibility through democratic processes. The core aim is to achieve an ecologically sustainable basis for human living with a commitment to social justice and the development of all humans, other creatures and natural forces to achieve expression of the potential of all life. However, as most people now live in cities or urban areas these ideas will need to be developed in the content of urban life. The aim must be to create urban communities that are convivial, socially and economically just and ecologically sustainable.

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