

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6083>



Reviews

Facing the Apocalypse: Arguments for Ecosocialism

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Wednesday 22 May 2019

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

This is an important book . One may disagree on some issues -e.g. population, which I do not believe should be a major concern for ecologists - but Alan Thornett arguments are a substantial contribution to ecosocialist thinking - and action. In clear and precise language, without academic jargon, his book is precious tool for the socio-ecological struggles of the future.

First of all *Facing the Apocalypse* is a powerful civilisational wake-up call : we must act, here and now, to prevent an ecological catastrophe (I prefer this term to « apocalypse », which has confusing religious meanings) of unheard proportions. Climate change, water shortages, mass pollution of land and sea, mass species extinction are some of the dimensions of a global ecological crisis. The consequences for human life can be devastating. Just to give an exemple : if we continue with « business as usual » for a few decades more, the melting of the global ice sheets will be inevitable and the main cities of human civilisation – for instance New York, Nairobi, Shanghai, New Orleans, Venice and Amsterdam -would be submerged by a sea rise of four to six meters. We have now entered , since the mid-20th Century, in a new geological age, the Anthropocene, where some basic aspects of the planet's environment, such as the climate, are being changed by human activity.

Unfortunately, for most of the left, the ecological issue has been a low priority, often at the bottom of the heap. It is seen as an add-on, an optimal extra, not as a number one issue. The record of the main forces of the left during the 20th Century - Social-Democracy and Stalinism – is disastrous. While during the first years after the October Revolution there existed a strong ecological current in the USSR, Stalinism transformed the Soviet economy into a destructive productivist Juggernaut.

The hope for the future comes from the various movements of resistance against environmental destruction. Often indigenous communities are in the front line for the defense of land, forests and water against oil and tar-sand extraction or pipeline building: they are the most effective protectors of the planet's ecosystems. Thornett pays homage to Hugo Blanco, a towering figure of the indigenous struggles in Peru for 50 years, inumerous times arrested, threatened with death, exiled, and now a fierce campaigner for ecosocialism.

There are some important insights in Marx about the metabolic rift between humans and nature caused by the capitalist system. But one can consider William Morris as the first pionneer of ecosocialism, a new development in socialist theory and practice, whose main proponents in the 20th Century were Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, Raymond William and Murray Bookchin, as well as, more recently, the ecomarxists John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett. For the moment, the Fourth International is the only international radical left current with an ecosocialist programm.

Alan Thornett defends certains positions which are not shared by most people in the radical left. For instance, he strongly believes in the importance of personal behaviour and individual responsibility ; he favors certain kinds of carbon taxes ; and he thinks that the Paris COP 21 Conference, despite its weaknesses, should be defended and reinforced.

While most ecosocialists would agree to the need of immediate measures against CO2 emissions, even in the limits of the capitalist system, many are sceptical of carbon taxes as an efficient method. Alan Thornett believes that James Hansen's fee and dividend carbon taxes could produce a big reduction in CO2 emissions, here and now.

However, Thornett's most controversial proposition is that the planetary population growth is a serious ecological

Facing the Apocalypse: Arguments for Ecosocialism

issue. In a honest recognition of the polemical nature of this viewpoint, he opens a space for discussion, inviting different perspectives to be voiced, in favour of his approach (Laure Mazur) or against it (Betsy Hartman, Derek Wall).

Is ecosocialism the only solution or is the capitalist system able to prevent catastrophe ? At the conclusion of the book Thornett writes :

"In the end, if capitalism is faced with the destruction of the planet's capacity to sustain human life (...) they will finally act to resolve it. The problem is that they will leave it until it is too late to avoid massive destruction ; and they will carry it out by dictatorial means and at the expense of the most impoverished people in the planet ".

Frankly, I do not believe that the capitalist system is able to 'resolve ' the ecological crisis ; it has consistently shown its unwillingness to do so in the last decades, and the its leaders now elected, such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, are the least inclined to take any measures. And soon, when the temperature rise arrives at 2°C, it will indeed be too late to stop the disaster. This does not mean, of course, that one should wait until ecosocialism arrives : mass popular mobilizations can bring about significant measures, opening the way for an ecological transition. As Alan Thornett argues, to force capitalism to make major changes is part of the struggle for ecosocialism...

You can order *Facing the Apocalypse* from [Resistance Books](#) or from [the IIRE](#)