

Review

The Enemy of Nature. The end of capitalism or the end of the world

Joel Kovel (London: Zed Books, 2002)

Reviewed by Jacklyn Cock

The documents and discussion at Cosatu's 9th National Congress show a failure to acknowledge that we are living through the early stages of ecological collapse. While there is a strong resolve to "re-direct the National Democratic Revolution towards socialism" there is no acknowledgement that a focus on the ecological crisis could be a way of doing so. It could be a route to mobilise society and all progressive forces against the current macro-economic framework by showing that capitalism's pressure to expand is not ecologically sustainable.

Ecological collapse is most dramatically evident in global warming with its devastating pattern of chaotic weather and habitat change. The irony here is that those most affected are the marginalised peoples of the south, particularly in Africa where agricultural communities already struggle to cope with changing rainfall patterns, and the spread of diseases such as cholera and malaria.

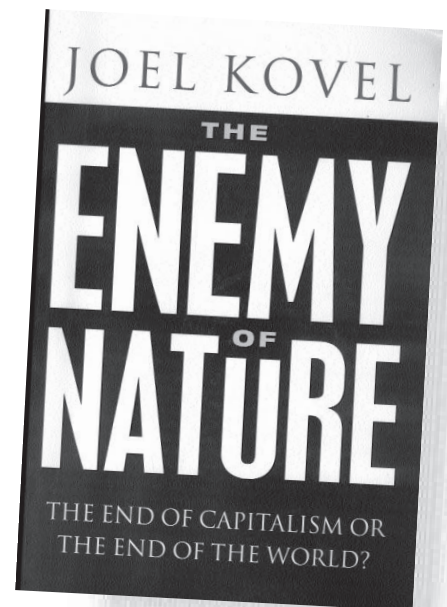
Those most responsible for increasing carbon emissions are the consumers of the north, and the elites of the south. This pattern of deprivation and over-consumption is clear in contemporary South Africa, now one of the most unequal societies in the world and one of the worst contributors to global warming. Policy proposals to build 15 more coal fired power stations to

meet our electricity needs ignore this reality. Clearly renewable energy is a cleaner alternative and points to how the ecological and social crisis are linked. Social justice demands that the mass of our people should get clean, safe energy. Environmental justice demands that this take the form of renewable energy with its potential to create employment and to increase local participation in decentralised enterprises.

It has been estimated that if South Africa generates 15% of total electricity use in 2020 using renewable energy technology it will create 36 400 new jobs, without taking any jobs away from coal-based electricity. Over 1.2 million direct and indirect jobs would be generated if some of South Africa's total energy needs were sourced with renewables by that year.

However, Kovel shows that global warming is only one component of a much deeper ecological crisis. "... it is not about any given ecosystem damage such as global warming, species loss, resource depletion, or the widespread intoxication by new chemicals... It is about the fact that these kinds of things are all happening together..."

Capitalism is the force driving this ecological crisis, through its unrelenting pressure to expand. Kovel describes it as a "suicidal regime". Capital has ignored reports dating back to 1972 when the Club



of Rome pointed to the ecological limits on expansion. Kovel points out that "the present world system in effect has had three decades to limit its growth and it has failed so abjectly that even the idea of limiting growth has been banished from official discourse". In its place we have the empty concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development says nothing about justice or about whose needs should be met. As Wolfgang Sachs has stressed, the alleviation of poverty must be linked to 'the alleviation of wealth' because to extend the lifestyles of the capitalist consumer classes would require the natural resources of five planets.

Capitalist expansion is driven by the corporations Kovel terms "ecological destroyers". Corporate neglect of environmental considerations and human needs in the drive for profit was most dramatically illustrated in the case of the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal India. Cost cutting in 1984 resulted in the deaths of 8 000 people in the first three days and injuries to 120 000.

Nearer home it is evident in the South Durban basin that now has the worst rate of asthma in the world as a result of air pollution from Engen

and Sapref (South African Petroleum Refinery owned by BP and Shell) or in Vanderbijlpark where pollution of the groundwater by Iscor (now Mittal Steel) has had devastating impacts on the health and livelihoods of thousands of people. These are mainly the poor and the powerless whose voices go unheard. This silence is linked to the invisibility of much air and water pollution which makes it easy for policy makers to ignore ecological damage.

This damage has reached crisis proportions. Kovel does not present any apocalyptic scenario, but rather “a slow and steady decline in ecosystems associated with a rise in authoritarianism”. We see this rise in the war against terror. Kovel argues that, “The dialectics of terror and ecological disintegration are joined in the regime of oil. This constitutes, on the one hand, the chief material dynamic of the ecological crisis, and on the other, the organising principle for imperial domination of those lands where the conflict is being fought out. Petroleum fuels industrial society and the growth of the West is necessarily a growth in the exploitation and control of these lands where it is most strategically located. As these happen to be largely Islamic, so is the stage set for the great struggle now unfolding”. Kovel wrote those words in 2002 and it is now widely recognised that oil production in the world has peaked, and that some 72 000 people have been killed in the ‘war on terror’ since 9.11.2001.

Confronting the reality of ecological collapse involves more far reaching measures than renewable energy, unleaded petrol or recycled newspapers. In the way that Rosa Luxemburg posed the choice for humanity as ‘socialism or barbarism’, our choice now is ‘either capital or our future.’ Capital “is not what most people take it to be. It is not a rational system of markets in which freely constituted individuals create wealth

in healthy competition. It is, rather, a spectral apparatus that integrates earlier modes of domination, especially that by gender, and generates a gigantic force field of profit-seeking that polarizes all human activity and sucks it into itself.”

Kovel’s solution is a revolution he calls “ecosocialist” which he claims is the only way to ensure not just survival but a better life for all. If we value a future “capitalism must be brought down and replaced with an ecologically worthy society.” To overcome capital “there must be basic changes in ownership of productive resources so that, ultimately, the earth is no longer privately owned, and second, our productive powers, the core of human nature, have to be liberated, so that people self-determine their productive power.”

Ecosocialism is ‘more than socialism’ with “its association of economic failure, political repression and environmental blight”. Nature will cease to be simply a store of resources or a repository of waste. Ecosocialism will ‘restore the intrinsic value of nature’ to a free association of producers. The ideal of sufficiency will replace growth. “Sufficiency makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lack health care or succour in old age... Sufficiency is a better term than the ecological buzzword, sustainability, as the latter leaves ambiguous the question of whether what is to be sustained is the existing system or not”.

While Kovel is weakest on the nature of ecosocialism and the means of achieving it, his book is totally convincing on the ecologically destructive nature of capitalism. The labour movement needs to acknowledge this because, as Kovel states, “There is no time to lose and a world to be won”.

Jacklyn Cock is a professor of sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Khabzela’s life spotlights youth realities

In the previous *Labour Bulletin* we reviewed *Khabzela: The Life and Times of a South African*. Sharon Ekambaram also read the book and it provoked for her some important reflections on youth behaviour seen through the lens of Khabzela’s life experience.

Reading Nkululeko Nkomo’s review of Liz McGregor’s book *Khabzela: The Life and Times of a South African in Labour Bulletin* 30.3 made me reflect on the HIV epidemic and young people.

These are my thoughts informed mostly by reading McGregor’s book. My interpretation may also be informed by the fact that I am an HIV/AIDS activist and that I am a black woman struggling with issues of sexuality in a society dominated by violence against women and women’s growing economic empowerment.

This book about one man’s life reflected for me the tragedy of thousands of young people dying prematurely from this disease. Something that could be avoided. I asked myself “Is it because poor people’s lives are cheap?”

Khabzela’s death was a shocking and

