



# Social Ecology And Community Development

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Social ecology, as developed by Murray Bookchin, brilliantly presents a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing the crises of modernity. It is perhaps the first such comprehensive approach since Marx, and suggests a reconstructive practice which holds promise of fundamentally transforming people's relation to nature and to other people. The ultimate promise of social ecology is the reharmonization of culture and nature. A vital element in that profound transformation lies in the connection between social ecology and community development.

## Traditional Approaches to Community Development

Community development is an often-abused concept. Perhaps the best way to begin to define it is to state what it is not. As I use the term, community development is not the delivery of services to a needy population by professionals. This is the traditional model put forward for decades by professional development agencies. It is the War on Poverty model that views communities as battlefields on which "strategic resources" must be brought to bear. It calls for bureaucratic intervention on a massive scale to improve education, health care, housing, nutrition, economic opportunity, and other facets of a community's life. Needless to say, these goals must be incorporated into any meaningful approach to community development. The problem lies with the methodology, the process whereby these noble ends are achieved.

## Towards a Holistic Approach

True community development cannot rest on a foundation of outsiders delivering services. Such an approach inevitably fosters dependence on external "experts" and "resources". This dependency hinders the development of indigenous leadership, broad participation and local self-reliance. Ultimately, it often degenerates into a form of social control, strengthening subordination to the dominant culture, furthering the homogenization of communities, and reinforcing centralization of power and policymaking in the hands of outsiders. This approach leads to the disempowerment of communities and citizens, not their development.

Nor can we understand community development in the terms presented by the Reagan administration. Their position is reactionary to the core, and lacks even the good intentions of the War on Poverty approach. They suggest a policy rooted in private-sector investment and a "trickle down" effect which can lead only to exploitation, domination and community disintegration. Here too, the focus is on absorbing communities into the mainstream of the dominant culture.

The linchpin of this strategy is to offer incentives for private enterprise to "develop" a community, thus subsidizing its subjugation. Domestic "enterprise zones" have been proposed which would replicate the domination of Third World nations by corporate investments. The intention is to offer a package of tax deferments, relaxed health and safety standards, and an elimination of both anti-pollution measures and the minimum wage, in order to entice private industry to invest in economically depressed communities.

The definition of community development here is economic. The assumption is that business will provide jobs, jobs equal income, and increased income constitutes community development. Yet, the reality is that although such an approach may

possibly increase income for individual community members, it is done at the cost of cultural tradition, community cohesion, a healthy physical environment, and community control of important resources.

A more benign form of private-sector development was attempted in the early 1970s under the rubric of “Black Capitalism”. Here the effort targeted individual entrepreneurs within a community and aided them in their efforts to establish small businesses. A similar expectation of prosperity “trickling down” underlay this approach. The reality of Black Capitalism was that the majority of these enterprises failed, unable to compete with their more highly capitalized, better organized corporate competition, and the few that succeeded brought prosperity only to their owners and to a handful of employees. As a result, they increased social stratification in the communities they were supposed to develop.

Another traditional approach to community development, “urban renewal” through city planning, has had an equally dismal record. The failure of ambitious plans for the rehabilitation of massive areas has been well documented. Yet, planners persist in imposing new spatial relations on neighborhoods with the expectation that their designs can create community. While architecture and planning can help to reinforce particular social relations, community development is not a “design” problem. Grandiose plans for urban renewal reflect a technocratic mentality which permeates our civilization, a belief in the quick fix of technics. Historically, people have understood that design requires an integration into the social life of a community if it is to enhance the quality of life. There is a tradition which recognizes the holistic nature of community design, but it is largely ignored by the technocrats who populate professional planning.

The tendency of our society to seek technical fixes, technological solutions to what are essentially social problems, is a strong one, and has been carried over into community development efforts. The introduction of “alternative technologies” into the community development schemes of the 1970s constitutes a case in point. Alternative technology was given a central role in a variety of pilot projects for community development during the Carter administration. But the model of introduction was, in too many cases, one of experts setting up technical systems without significant community participation. As a result, certain ghetto neighborhoods are now littered with rusting solar collectors, nonfunctional windmills, and graffiti-covered greenhouses. The “technological solution” to community development means no solution at all.

In addition to the institutionalized approaches that have been described over the past two decades, there have also been a variety of efforts at grassroots community development, some of which have met with more success. These efforts have largely focused on the issues of community participation and control of local institutions like school boards, planning boards, and specific programs in housing and job training. Many of their concerns and approaches to change parallel those of social ecology.

True community development, from the perspective of social ecology, must be a holistic process which integrates all facets of a community’s life. Social, political, economic, artistic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions must all be seen as part of a whole. They must be made to work together and to reinforce one another. For this reason, the development process must proceed from a self-conscious understanding of their interrelationships.

The dominant culture has fragmented and isolated social life into distinct realms of experience. The rediscovery of the organic ties between these realms is the starting point for the development process. Once they are recognized, it is possible to create holistic approaches to development that reintegrate all the elements of a community into a cohesive dynamic of cultural change. Here, social ecology draws an important principle from both nature and “primitive” society: the integrative character of life in both natural ecosystems and organic communities.

The everyday life of a community needs to be critically analyzed. Which relationships work, and which are nonfunctional? Are there traditions of mutualism and cooperation existent which can help a community to realize its goals, or must new forms be created? How can the face-to-face primary ties which characterized prebureaucratic societies be recreated in the context of contemporary community?

Is there an existing political sphere which can be expanded and/or transformed to empower the community? Town meetings, block associations, neighborhood planning assemblies, and popular referenda are all vehicles which can be revitalized through the process of community development. How do the existing governmental structures stand in relation to the community development process? The reclamation of politics by the community and the creation of an active citizenry are, from the perspective of social ecology, critical elements in community development.

How can the arts aid in community? Poetry, music, community murals, ritual drama, and literature can all help to foster a unique identity and to reinforce a community's sensibility, if fully integrated into the process.

The spiritual element of a community is important in the developmental matrix as well. From where does a community derive its values, its ethics, and the principles which orient its development? What is its cosmology? How can it gain the inspiration needed to sustain it through the long, difficult process of cultural reconstruction?

The social realm, including family structure, women's roles, social networks like clubs, gangs, and cliques must be examined as well. These relationships underlie many of a community's formal elements, and provide the clearest connection to the primary ties that need to be recreated.

The integration of relational ties, the cultural traditions, myths, folklore, spiritual beliefs, cosmology, ritual forms, political associations, technical skills, and knowledge of a community is crucial. All of these elements must be brought together to provide a base for development. These extra-economic factors are the critical components almost always ignored by the traditional development approaches. But the concern of social ecology is with the development of *community*, not mere economics. Economic development not rooted in a comprehensive understanding of community may well have a disintegrative effect.

However, the economics of a community, and here I use the term in the broadest sense, as its productive relations, are a vitally important aspect of the project. Who owns and controls the productive resources in a community? What can it do to develop its material base, particularly in the crucial areas of food and energy production? How can technology be used in the process? Are there existing functional or vestigial cooperative economic forms or traditions that can be utilized? Food co-ops, producers' co-ops, land trusts, common lands, and credit unions offer possibilities in this area.

In looking for models of ecological social organization, social ecology recognizes that we must consciously look to history to understand our own potential. For example, it proposes that we can separate the liberatory principles of primitive societies from their superstition, xenophobia, and ignorance. Human development and cultural evolution are not linear processes. We still carry the potential for coherent community within us. It is naive to assume that all was good in the primitive world. However, primitivity as a comparative model allows us to understand all that civilization has lost, and that our cooperative potential as a species is much greater than civilization would have us believe.

The form and sensibility of a community are both shaped by and help to shape its environment. This is equally true of tribal communities, the cities of Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica, the Greek *polis*, the cities of Renaissance Europe and the modern metropolis. In the case of the modern metropolis, however, the true substance of the relationship is clouded by the mediating effects of modern technology and the striving for "mastery" of the natural world. A sense of scale, an organic relationship to a specific environment, have all been central to the authentic sensibility which has informed community life for millennia, a sensibility which has begun to break down only in the very recent past.

This is not to deny the existence of imperial cultures in the past, but to recognize that these existed as a mode of domination, an overlay of oppression which exacted tribute from the local community. These local communities continued to provide a coherent framework for the social life of their residents, a sense of grounding and support that lay hidden beneath the veneer of empire.

It is the breakdown of local community and its total subjugation to the culture of domination which is unique to our own

time. Therefore, a primary task in the process of community development is the recreation of local community, and a key component in that task is the identification of humanly scaled boundaries and the reclamation of a sense of place, be it rural village, small town, or urban neighborhood.

The creation of sensibility of a community—the self-identification of people with place, a sense of commonality, cooperation, and a shared history and destiny—is difficult to achieve, particularly in a social milieu which emphasizes individualism, competition, mobility, and pluralism. The growth of values like individuality rooted in community, cooperation, identification with place, and cultural identity are antithetical to the thrust of the dominant culture. But just as the imperial cultures of the past constituted a mode of domination rather than an authentic form of sociation, the dominant culture of our own time is merely a system of control through exploitation and manipulation. The forms which that exploitation and manipulation take have been effective in destroying community, but they have not replaced it. They have left a vacuum, a hollow place in which resonates the neurotic individualism of Western societies and the collective hopelessness of the East. It is that vacuum, with the often unconscious yearning for reconnection it produces, that the community development process must fill.

Social ecology does not propose an abstract ideal society, but rather an evolving process of change, never to be fully realized. For as soon as we approach the ideal, the ideal changes. Engaging reality with the will to transform it opens up a new realm of possibilities. This is the most profound tradition of utopian thinking, a continuation of that of nineteenth century utopian Socialists like Owen and Fourier. Although their plans incorporated fanciful elements, their concern was with a built environment that reinforces community, with an integration of agriculture, industry, social discourse, poetry, spirit, and even, in Fourier's case, emotional diversity. The tradition finds still more explicit expression in the work of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. To this tradition, social ecology adds a consciously ecological perspective.

The utopian element in the community development process should not be misconstrued. Social ecology understands the limitations of utopia as blueprint, the tendency to retreat from the problems of reality into the cloud cuckoo land of abstract design. It also recognizes the power of utopia as inspiration and as a point of orientation in the day-to-day, incremental process of changing the world. It is the utopian process, holistic, participatory and integrative, that must inform the practice of community development.

This utopian view relies on community empowerment, the ability of a community to consciously plan for its future and to implement those plans. Empowerment can occur only through the creation of real forums for planning and policy-making, forums which are decentralized, participatory, and democratic. Communities must reclaim a public sphere which has become bureaucratized and professionalized. Old forms may be utilizable or new forms may have to be created, but without the initiative of an active citizenry no forum can serve as a vehicle for community empowerment. Empowerment must be rooted in the full participation of the citizenry in the decision-making process, the reintegration of politics into everyday life.

Social ecology also proclaims the ideal of local self-reliance, and dependence on indigenous resources and talents to the greatest extent possible. This does not, however, mean "self-sufficiency," a condition in which no community has existed since the Neolithic. Self-reliance recognizes and encourages interdependence among communities, but emphasizes an ecologically sustainable ethos in the realms of production and consumption, decentralization in the political sphere, and a healthy respect for diversity.

Confederations must be created to help coordinate cooperative activities between self-reliant communities, to administer those interdependent functions which are recognized, and to work to equalize resources between communities. Social ecology suggests that such confederations might form a "commune of communes," a commonwealth which could extend from the local to the regional to the continental level and beyond, to result in an ultimate unity through diversity. In this goal, social ecology echoes the telos of natural evolution itself: a movement towards ever greater complexity and diversity within interrelated webs of life.

The tools and techniques needed to develop communities as unique cultural entities based in the concepts of ecological sustainability and local self-reliance are already available. Decentralized, community scaled technologies for energy production can help to support the kind of holistic community development envisioned by social ecology. Solar energy, wind power, and small-scale hydroelectric all offer the potential for renewable, nonpolluting sources of energy. Food-production techniques like French intensive gardening, hydroponics, bioshelter technology, aquaculture and permaculture can provide a good percentage of a community's food needs on a year-round basis. All of these techniques are proven, and many are commercially available. Given a humanly scaled community, the integration of agriculture and industry relying on alternative technologies and advanced, ecologically sound food-production techniques could provide a viable material base for a self-reliant community.

One measure of a community's sustainability and self-reliance lies in the relationship between town and country. Where the city has become totally alienated from the countryside as in contemporary urban society, an unhealthy relationship exists. On the one hand, the city dominates the countryside, draining it of resources for its own use; on the other hand, the city is heavily dependent on the countryside, parasitically requiring energy-subsidized forms of agriculture and transportation for its existence.

The ethos of the dominant culture has fostered a specialization of function which has excluded food production from most communities. The industrialization of agriculture has created a dangerous centralized approach to food production, in which population centers are dependent on food producers thousands of miles away for their daily sustenance. This is a situation highly vulnerable to a variety of crises, such as crop infestation, energy shortages, and disruptions in transportation. If any of these disruptions occurred, disaster would ensue. This form of food production also has destructive ecological implications, like destruction of soils, loss of genetic diversity, and vulnerability to infestation by fungi and insects.

Historically, healthy communities have achieved a balance between town and country. The Greek *polis* of Athens, for example, consisted of a central city and an outlying agricultural district. The medieval commune integrated gardens within its walls. Even in our own era, there has been a more balanced relationship. New York City, until the 1950s, got much of its food from Long Island and New Jersey. There were dairy farms on Staten Island, and chicken farms in Brooklyn. Today, the regional agricultural economy has broken down.

The relationship between town and country has other, nonmaterial aspects as well. The predominantly rural values of coherent communities have given way, for the most part, to the *anomie* and alienation characteristic of the city. The breakdown of community grows out of this basic shift in values. The Folk-Urban Continuum of Robert Redfield, Max Weber's contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, the split noted by Marx between town and country are all paradigms which express a social division that is reflected in our own time by the almost total alienation of community from its basis in nature.

The development of healthy communities requires a rebalancing of town and country, a reintroduction of the organic world into the largely synthetic environment of the city. Such an action may initially be rooted in the purely material realm, as in the introduction, through community initiatives, of green spaces, neighborhood gardens, food parks, permacultures, etc. This transformation of the physical environment and the introduction of the skills of nurturance and husbandry needed to transform the physical environment will contribute to the development of a new sense of community, which will reflect these skills as social values.

### **The Holistic Approach in Practice**

At this point, a concrete example of community development should help to illustrate the praxis of social ecology. Loisaïda is the Puerto Rican section of New York's Lower East Side where residents attempted to actualize elements of this approach in the mid 1970s. There is much to be learned from this experience. Let me describe the way that one of the community's problems was turned into a community resource through the development process.

In Loisaida, there are over one hundred vacant lots. They were rubble-strewn dump heaps, breeding grounds for rats and \*censored\*roaches, an eyesore and health hazard. These lots often served as a dangerous “playground” for neighborhood children, and constituted a blight on the community. Viewed from the perspective of social ecology, however, these lots represented a precious community resource: open space. In an environment of concrete and decaying tenements, these lots, a substantial percentage of the land of the neighborhood, offered valuable sites for recreation, education, economic development, and community cultural activity.

Local activists recognized this potential and began the development process at the grass roots, organizing residents to clean up the lots and put them to constructive use. Most of the lots belonged to the city of New York, which had done nothing to improve them. The people of Loisaida combined a critical analysis of their problem with direct action. They protested to the city, and they cleaned the lots themselves and began to use them.

They converted some to “vest-pocket parks,” a concept introduced by Robert Nichols, outfitting them with benches and planting green spaces. Others were turned into playgrounds, utilizing recycled material for equipment. Swings were made from discarded lumber and old tires, Jungle Gyms were built from recycled beams. Other lots were turned into community gardens, which became a focal point for intergenerational contact. One large lot was transformed into an outdoor cultural center, La Plaza Cultural, where community poets, theater groups, and local musicians all performed. Several lots were adopted by local schools for use as teaching centers where area youths were introduced to lessons in agriculture and ecology. The transformation of the lots helped to reintroduce the natural world into this ghetto community.

These were simple actions, but their results were profound. The lots were initially transformed by people acting on their felt need to reconstruct their environment. They acted without the official sanction of the city; in fact, in some cases, it was in the face of opposition from the city. This direct action was a first step towards community empowerment.

The initiative came from within the community, from an indigenous leadership which analyzed the problem and sought a utopian (i.e., reconstructive) solution. They did not look to the city for a solution; they created their own. They contested with the city for the material base of their community, the land; and, in most cases, they gained either legal leases to the lots for token amounts of money, or outright title. Several community land trusts were created to remove particular lots from the real estate market forever, and to guarantee their continued use as a community resource. A philosophy of “doing more with less,” the motto of Charas, one of the community groups involved, served as an inspiration to the open-space movement in Loisaida.

Owing to a holistic approach, a number of other elements in the community development process grew out of these simple actions. A problem turned into a resource, and the health of the community benefited as a result. The people involved in the work gained a sense of pride and accomplishment. Several youth gangs were involved in the movement, and their experience in constructive social action helped to bring them off the street. A cooperative was formed to manufacture playground equipment from recycled items, creating jobs and income for the people involved.

The gardening groups drew on the traditions of the Jivaro, the Puerto Rican peasantry from which many of the Loisaida’s residents hail, and thus provide a connection to a living cultural tradition. They were able to draw on a cross-section of the community, young and old, which often remains alienated from the development process. The gardens grew fresh, healthy, organic produce, improving nutrition and lowering food costs for community gardeners. They enhanced the community’s self-reliance in an important symbolic way, and the training in gardening led to plans for increasing it further, through the construction of commercial rooftop greenhouses.

The establishment of the cultural plaza created an outdoor space for the celebration of Loisaida’s New York Puerto Rican culture. This helped to strengthen the identity of people often traumatized by their move to the mean streets of New York. This identity has been central to the development of an effective movement for change in Loisaida.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the open-space movement was the empowerment of the people involved. The

transformation of their vacant lots drew them into a larger vision of what their community might be. The participants in the open-space joined together with other community activists working on issues like health care, education, housing, and job development. Quarterly town meetings were held to chart the progress of the movement, to coordinate and integrate their actions, and to develop a comprehensive plan for the future of the community. An alternative grassroots planning group, the Joint Planning Council, emerged to challenge the official city plan for the Loisaida community, previously a disenfranchised, demoralized ghetto, became a force to be reckoned with in New York, and emerged as a model for grassroots, ecologically oriented approaches to community development.

The incorporation of the ideas of social ecology into the process of community development provided a clear demonstration of the power of Bookchin's theories to further movements for cultural change. Social ecology represents a vital source of ideas which will increasingly find expression in an effective praxis. We must continue to develop and articulate its theories in a holistic framework, because social ecology, by virtue of its comprehensive vision and its truly radical nature, represents a challenge to the basic assumptions of our civilization. It is only by developing such a challenge that we can hope to move through our current crises toward an ecological, harmonious, and peaceful world.

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