When Murray Bookchin opened the debate between social ecology and "deep ecology," the Green movement in this country entered a long-overdue process of political and philosophical self-definition. Ecology ceased to be a mere bumpersticker slogan. "Cheap unity" was abandoned for political debate and argument, which can only lend the Green movement a greater philosophical coherence and understanding of the social roots of the ecological crisis.(1)

In this first of a series of articles, I hope to open debate on another question crucial to this process: Will the Greens adopt a dogmatic pacifist line on the question of nonviolence? Or will they embrace strategic nonviolence, forthrightly upholding people's natural right to armed self-defense of their liberty? I would like to argue for the latter, focusing more on matters of broad principle and on the social roots of violence and power than on the specifics of strategy and organizational forms.

Let us begin by acknowledging that no consensus exists within the movement on these questions, and by acknowledging also that the Left Green position in favor of strategic nonviolence is a minority one, not only within the Greens but within the wider movements for peace and social justice as well. Let us also dispense from the start with the almost religious aura surrounding the question of nonviolence in American activist movements today. If we agree with Bookchin that the word ecology "is no magic term that unlocks the real secret of our abuse of nature," let us also agree that the word nonviolence is no magic term that unlocks the secret of people's abuse of one another.

Movements for social change need to address the question of nonviolence from a political perspective: What are the social roots of violence? What can be done by social movements to minimize, if not eliminate, the use of violence as a means of resolving political conflict? Does the pacifist position always, in all circumstances, command the "moral highground"? Or are there times when taking up arms in defense of freedom and justice is not only "justified" but commendable on highly ethical grounds?

These are only some of the questions Greens need to address in a serious, principled manner, and I would argue that Gandhian dogma is no help to us here. If the word ecology, as Bookchin has made clear, "can be as easily abused, distorted, and tainted as words like 'democracy' and 'freedom,'" so too can the concept of nonviolence be abused by shifting people's focus from the institutional roots of violence in a hierarchical society to questions of individual belief and morality. It can also be abused when reasoned debate gives way to a self-righteous moralism on the part of people whose social position serves to effectively shield them: from any real threat of violent oppression by the state.

It is my hope that opening debate on this more or less closed question will help clarify certain important differences between recognizing the right of individuals, social movements, and peoples to armed self-defense on the one hand, and the use of offensive political violence à la the Red Army Faction and other terrorist sects of both the left and the right on the other. I hasten to add, however, that a definitive clarification of these differences would require a full volume and will not be attempted here, where my intention is to provoke a much broader, freewheeling discussion of nonviolence and how it will be defined by the Greens.

Questions and Contradictions

Many pacifists automatically translate the rejection of absolute nonviolence by individual activists and organized groups into support for political violence and traditional notions of an armed struggle waged by a "vanguard" party or minority faction. But are these questions so starkly drawn that a movement's moral and strategic options are limited to the extremes of pacifism on the one side and terrorism on the other?

I would argue that in the real world choices like these rarely present themselves to movements struggling for fundamental institutional change, that is, to movements that have abandoned strictly moral symbolism for direct confrontation with the state and social revolution. The issue of nonviolence must be viewed in a more nuanced light than is normally the case, if the moral questions raised by advocates of nonviolence are to be considered relevant in the context of the existent realities of power.
The Left Green program calls for nonviolent social revolution. It calls for a commitment to strategic nonviolence as a fundamental principle and for the use of creative, militant forms of direct action to defend, advance, and, indeed, embody the movement's goals and principles. It does not call for armed struggle in the tradition as sense, much less for the creation of an armed "vanguard," minority or otherwise. The program does, however, affirm the right of people to bear arms in defense of their liberty - a natural right established by the American Revolution more than two centuries ago - declaring that "the right of self-defense against violent attacks is not the same as a traditional strategy of armed struggle."(2)

In short, Left Greens draw a distinction between the armed defense of long-established rights and the freedoms gained through political struggle on the one hand, and the offensive use of arms as a means of dictating political change through military or paramilitary force on the other. The German Greens recognize the same distinction in their Federal Program: "The principle of nonviolence does not restrict the fundamental rights of self-defense and includes social resistance in its various forms."(3)

By recognizing the right of self-defense, both programs simultaneously reject the pacifist position and reveal the lack of consensus within the Greens on the definition of nonviolence. Neither program successfully resolves the tension between the pacifist and nonpacifist camps; at best, they reflect temporary compromises between conflicting tendencies that have agreed to ignore real differences in the interest of short term political expediency.

The question is whether this decision to avoid political conflict in the short term will prove to be a wise one in the long. Conventional wisdom would have it that consensus is always best, even if the consensus reflects nothing more than a compromise that resolves nothing and in fact incorporates serious philosophical conflicts into the movement's program as a matter of policy. I would argue that this all-too-common effort to find consensus for its own sake is a mistake. Questions as basic and potentially life-threatening as whether or not Greens will defend themselves from violence should be argued now and not later. There are tough rimes ahead politically, economically, and ecologically as the American powers-that-be continue their head-long "drift" to the right; and I, for one, would like to know which way my allies or potential allies intend to jump when (and if) this "drift" is met by serious resistance, and the resistance by the inevitable reaction.

These are not idle questions for academic discussion and speculation. To transform the present society into a free and ecological society will require a social revolution so thoroughgoing as to be without precedent. There are only two alternatives to this social revolution: the rise of what Bookchin has rightfully named "ecofascism" and an ecological catastrophe that promises to be every bit as devastating to life itself as thermonuclear immolation. Intimately bound up with the ecological issues facing this society are a number of hard, practical questions that the Green movement has yet to address, not the least of which is the inextricable link between militarism and the ecological crisis, neither of which is going to disappear simply because individual people decide to be nicer to each other and to "walk softly on the planet."

If we are going to talk about violence and nonviolence, let us at least avoid the system's perverse logic by openly naming the real source of violence in the world today. Is Leonard Peltier to be left to rot for life in prison by a movement unprepared to name the real terrorists in this society? Are there really North Americans prepared to deliver sermons on the evils of "violence" to the men, women, and children who have chosen the rifle in El Salvador? Does such arrogance exist that would condemn the "terrorism" of the Irish Republican Army in the face of eight centuries of relentless British domination and racism? The answer, sadly, is yes, but the more important question is whether such arrogance will go unchallenged by the Greens.

Let's call things by their true names and get down to the question at hand. The United States government and its corporate partners constitute a primary source of violence in the form of imperialism, ecocide, counterinsurgency warfare, and outright terrorism in large parts of the world. This structural reality of power not only increases the responsibility of American social movements to defend people's right to self-determination and freedom from superpower domination in its numerous forms. It also greatly increases the importance of answering questions of praxis in a rational manner based on the lessors of historical experience and the concrete realities of power in an era of highly centralized, militaristic nation-states, equipped with armamentoria and surveillance technologies without historical precedent.

Given the realities of world power and the entrenched forces of the centralized state, activist movements must struggle to free themselves, to the extent possible, of contradictions in theory and praxis. Yet the movements for peace and social justice are riddled with contradictions, thanks in no small measure to an equally entrenched dogma of "personal responsibility" that often reduces the structural problem of institutional violence to matters of individual morality.

In the case of national liberation struggles, for example, many pacifists enter into contradictions by
insisting that they support the political gains of popular movements and the right of Third World peoples to self-determination, but not the recourse to arms that made these gains possible in the first place and without which the right of self-determination would be an abstract right at best.

Many nonpacifist radicals, on the other hand, enter into further, some would say racist, contradictions by affirming the right of armed struggle by oppressed peoples in the Third World, while insisting on an absolute commitment to nonviolence in the United States and other "advanced" countries, as if the right of self-determination here were somehow guaranteed or any less abstract in the absence of a social movement prepared to defend itself and its liberties, with arms if need be. This international division of rights (to coin a term) is highly question able, in my view, and the arguments advanced in support of this position rarely evade their own hypocrisy.

For reasons of space, a detailed examination of these and other common contradictions in activist theory will not be attempted here. In any case, they have been explored elsewhere by principled radicals concerned with the making of fundamental change in the United States-notably, by Ward Churchill in a provocative essay, "Pacifism as Pathology."(4)

What is important is to understand that the question of absolute nonviolence versus strategic nonviolence and the present contradictions surrounding this question are not matters of "abstract theory" to be endlessly discussed by "armchair intellectuals." The way we choose to answer these "theoretical" questions raises eminently practical issues for activists committed to a long-term struggle for radical change and the making of a free, ecological society. For examples:

Where should political power reside in a democratic society? How is that power to be controlled from below, as it must be if the word democracy is to have any meaning? How are the political gains achieved by popular movements, here or elsewhere, to be successfully defended against the inevitable, normally armed, forces of reaction, without the movements' resorting to authoritarian, militaristic forms and methods of defense?

If we follow this line of questioning to its conclusion, a still larger issue emerges regarding the relationship of the Green movement to the nation-state itself. This question, though crucial to the movement's development, has largely been sidestepped by the Greens, not only in the United States but in West Germany as well, where it lies at the crux of the growing left-right split in Die Grünen. It is within this larger context that any coherent discussion of nonviolence must take place.

"Peace" or Social Revolution?

Most of the present contradictions in theory and praxis are resolved once the natural right of self-defense is recognized, along with the right of individuals to make the personal choice of whether or not to take up arms should the situation arise, and to act on their choice in accordance with the dictates of conscience. So long as these choices are recognized as strictly voluntary matters freely determined by the individual, issues of coercion and authoritarianism need not arise.

The issues raised by the question of nonviolence and the right of self-defense are too complex to lend themselves to pacifist dogma and universal declarations of right and wrong, where nonviolence is understood to be right in all circumstances and violence wrong, including "violence" used in simple self-defense against physical attack and political repression. Once we consider the interconnections among ecology, economy, media, politics, and military means of repression of the present world system, it becomes clear that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Violence is now institutionalized on a world scale. Federal taxes levied in Vermont pay for air raids on peasant villages in El Salvador. Food prices established and manipulated by speculators in First World "commodity markets" determine who eats and who starves in the Third World.(5)

Hence the question of nonviolence becomes more than a matter of personal pacifism or "world peace." Should "peace" somehow break out, or more likely be imposed on a fractious Third World (or for that matter on potentially fractious regions of the United States like the "underclass" ghettos of the inner cities) without first addressing the structural injustice built into the social order of individual countries like El Salvador-and more important, of the present world system-such a peace would resemble "the peace of the tomb" more than any cause for celebration among thoughtful people of conscience.

Peace is not always a high priority on the agenda of social movements waging revolutionary struggles. Nor are social peace and "stability" necessarily desirable in and of themselves. Nicaragua under the Somoza dynasty, for example, was a very "peaceful" place for long periods of time, internationally famous for its "stability." So, too, were many other places, like South Africa, Vietnam under French colonial rule,
Mississippi before the rise of the civil rights movement, Guatemala for several hundred years, Armenia until recent times, the Philippines, and the West Bank. There exists a nearly guaranteed "peace" and "stability" in authoritarian states like Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Romania, and others too numerous to list here. The streets of Paraguay are exceedingly peaceful. Siberia is perhaps the most peaceful place in the world.

If the Greens are to help build an American peace movement worthy of the name, they must first recognize that "fundamental social change, not only personal commitments to nonviolence, is needed to remove institutionalized violence in the world"(6), and that social movements whose goal is institutional change cannot help but enter into prolonged confrontations with the established powers and, if successful, with reaction and counterrevolution.

Serious activists need to remember that violence, or the threat of violence, is not a primary form of domination but rather a means of enforcing domination, whether we speak of the domination of women by men, young by old, race by race, class by class, nation by nation, or whatever you like. This being the case, it goes without saying that when the dominating powers and institutions feel their authority threatened in any significant way, they employ their methods of enforcement in order to retain their power and privilege and to conserve the "stability" of the status quo. To assume otherwise is to fly in the face of history.

If we are to speak of "eliminating violence" from the world, as is so often done, we must focus the brunt of our attention not only on the immediate, obvious manifestations of social domination (i.e., acts of physical violence, however terrible). More important, we must focus on hierarchy itself, where we find the root of social domination as well as the form taken by domination in its myriad manifestations.(7)

**Hierarchy, Power, and Violence**

Social ecology is first and foremost a philosophy of human freedom, an anti-authoritarian nature philosophy. Its purpose is to study nature, conceived as natural evolution, as the potential ground of freedom and through this study to establish the foundations for an ecological ethics and a politics of total liberation. Its goal is the conscious entry of human beings into the making of their own history and the process of natural evolution.

That is to say, the political goal of social ecology is the creation of a society of free but interdependent individuals and communities who consciously perceive themselves and their interactions with each other and with the biotic world as an as-yet-unfulfilled expression of natural evolution's long striving toward consciousness. Its goal is the creation not simply of a society that perceives itself as a "part of nature," as contemporary cliché would have it, but a society that understands itself to be nature become conscious of itself and therefore able to consciously intervene not only in social evolution as such but in the ages-long process of natural evolution itself. Such a society would be, in effect, the culmination of one aspect of natural evolution-the actualization of the consciousness immanent in nature-and the beginning of another: the unfolding dialectic of self-determined evolution.

This study of natural evolution as the history of nature's striving for consciousness has led social ecologists to conclude, with Bookchin, that there is no hierarchy in nature. The hierarchical relationship existent between society and nature is a reflection, a projection or transference, if you will, of highly successful attempts on the part of some human beings to dominate others. Hierarchy is the institutionalized, organizational form taken by social domination as well as a means of ensuring its continuance, and violence is its method of enforcement.

Hence the ecological crisis is in every sense a social crisis. Not only is hierarchy projected onto nature as a rationale to justify its prior existence in society; hierarchical social relationships are mirrored in the present disastrous relationship of society to nature. If the ecological crisis is to be resolved in any way desirable by human standards, the social crises from which it stems must first be resolved through the actions of a social movement that is not only democratic but consciously anti-hierarchical.

These conclusions necessarily bring social ecologists into direct opposition with the nation-state, a highly advanced institution which embodies the entire logic of social hierarchy. The state's *raison d'être* is to enforce, through its self-granted "legal" monopoly of the use of violence, the various forms of social, cultural, political, and to an ever-increasing extent, economic domination of the many by the powerful elites that the state both serves and helps to create in both capitalist and state-"socialist" societies.

It is for this reason that social ecology has been called, not incorrectly, a form of "eco-anarchism." In essence, it is a nature philosophy leading to the development of an objective ecological ethics that affirms the anarchist's subjective moral opposition to the state as an institution founded on and by violence, and to hierarchy as such. Social ecology thus represents a major advance in anarchist theory. What was once a political and moral creed has, through Bookchin's development of social ecology, been buttressed with a
The Green "pillar" of participatory democracy, not to mention the very idea of decentralization, remains an illusion, at best a bumpersticker slogan, if we do not come to grips with the nation-state as a centralized politico-military institution whose power and "legitimacy" ultimately rest on its self-granted monopoly of violence, and its willingness to use armed force in defense of its power and the maintenance of the social status quo. To equate the Green principle of nonviolence with pacifism is to recognize, even fortify, the "legitimacy" of the state by removing the ultimate guarantee of freedom embodied in the natural right of citizens to bear arms, not only for personal protection, but more important, to defend their political liberties in the face of centralized power.

Indeed, the fact that this natural right was appended to the federal Constitution as an amendment rather than as an article incorporated in the body of the document reflects the statist's concrete grasp of the realities of power. These realities, happily, were also understood by some of the more clear-sighted and democratic representatives of an armed people, who insisted that the right to arms be included in a Constitution already being foisted upon the citizenry by devious means. It reflects as well the political tensions of the time between those who would preserve and expand the freedoms gained by the revolution, and those who would roll back the astonishing political power embodied in the town meeting and an armed, revolutionary citizenry by instituting a centralized authority in the form of a wrongly named "federal" government. This tension in fact pervades the entire Constitution and Bill of Rights, created behind closed doors (and without a mandate from the people) to replace the earlier, more radical Articles of Confederation.

For the Green principle of participatory democracy (a principle carried into Green politics from its roots in the American New Left of the 1960s) to have any real meaning, the Greens will have to become a consciously anti-statist movement. They must be prepared from the beginning to understand that Green principles will not be instituted, nor an ecological society created, without an eventual, quite probably prolonged, confrontation with reaction and the armed force of the state. The outcome of this confrontation will be determined one way or another, in favor of the social movement and a participatory democracy, or in favor of reaction and the continued domination of society by the elites of capital and the state.

If this understanding, with all its implications, is to take root in the Green movement, an understanding of both freedom and political power more sophisticated than that currently evinced by the Greens and other "new social movements" will have to find fertile ground among activist Greens. Power, whether democratic power or state power, must be understood concretely. Power must, in Bookchin's words, be "conceived as real, indeed solid and tangible, not only as spiritual and psychological." Power is a "muscular fact of life" that plays a crucial role in the determining of society's destiny; it is not an ethereal mood or feeling, much less a mere state of mind, as some of the more prominent "shamans" plaguing the ecology movement would have it.

Power is a "solid and tangible fact to be reckoned with militarily, notably in the ubiquitous truth that the power of the state or the people eventually reposes in force. Whether or not the state has power depends upon whether or not the state exercises a monopoly of violence." In precisely the same way, whether or not the people have power depends upon whether or not the citizenry is armed and organizes its own democratic militia. This "muscular fact of life" was fully understood by the armed yeomanry of New England who became the principal actors in the American Revolution, even if it has largely been mystified or forgotten by the people of our own rime, within and without the grassroots movements.
Let us understand finally in this regard that the project of creating a free and ecological society will remain a precarious project indeed if the social movement is not prepared to replace the state's political and professional military with a genuine citizens' militia—a voluntary, armed political force with elected officers subject to recall, and composed of rotating patrols for police purposes and well-organized military contingents for dealing with external dangers to freedom. If, as Bookchin says, "the tragic history of the state's ascendency is the story of armed professionals who commandeered power from unarmed peoples:" the history of a revitalized struggle for self-governance will be the story of armed peoples reclaiming that usurped power and the concrete ability to freely determine their own destinies.

Strategic Nonviolence

Does this mean that social ecologists are calling for violence and armed struggle? Far from it. If social ecology is above all a philosophy of human freedom, it is also a philosophy of politics, indeed, of politics conceived in the most expansive sense of the word: the creation of a full-blown, face-to-face democracy in which politics and democracy would become not only means of decision making but highly celebrated ends in themselves. These ends, best named self-governance are conceived as a sensuous, visceral, I would even say erotic experience of freedom in the everyday lives of the citizenry at large.

Indeed, as I have maintained elsewhere, the principles of Green politics, carried to their conclusion, imply the creation of a society that would look very much like what Bookchin called "post-scarcity anarchism" in his late-sixties essay of the same name.(9) Without this direct experience of freedom in the lives of "ordinary" people as its concrete goal, the ideas embodied in Green politics rapidly dissolve into a misty cloud of what Chiah Heller has called, with ample justification, "eco-la-la."

A direct democracy and participatory political culture such as those envisioned by Bookchin in the literature of social ecology, and by the German Greens in their Federal Program, cannot be created through armed force. People cannot be forced into freedom; nor can an ecological consciousness be created through the barrel of a gun.

The kinds of social change envisioned by the Green movement at its best require a "genuinely democratic movement with a strong base of solidarity among its members united against life-threatening competition, and a hierarchical and performance-dominated way of thinking. These social and economic changes can only be accomplished using democratic means and with the support of the majority of the population."(10) This means above all that the struggle for a free, ecological society will be primarily a nonviolent political struggle for "the hearts and minds" of the people. It will be waged by a social movement prepared to lend Green ideas and principles an independent political expression and in this way seek to gain the support of the great majority of the population for radical, institutional change.

But a commitment to strategic nonviolence as a means of achieving the movement's political goals does not rule out the use of armed self-defense against official violence and armed reaction. The kind of political support needed is considerably more "muscular" than the highly abstract (and fickle) support claimed by mainstream politicians and self-serving, purportedly radical "leaders" like a Jesse Jackson or Burlington, Vermont's "socialist" mayor, Bernard Sanders.

As Howard Hawkins has often maintained, "voting is not enough." If "political support" of the movement's goals is to have concrete meaning, that support must be embodied in a social movement prepared not only to vote for radical change but also to take concerted, daring direct action to ensure that legislative advances are accomplished in fact. It must be prepared to stand behind political gains supported by a democratic majority and see to it that they are defended against reaction, through the use of both nonviolent social resistance and, if need be, armed self-defense. A movement unprepared to defend itself, its supporters, and social change accomplished through democratic struggle is, in my view, unworthy of the people's support in the first place.

It goes without saying that the present movements are far from gaining this kind of support. In fact, an independent political movement advancing its ideas on their own terms is nowhere in evidence in the United States—indeed, all mythologies of the "Rainbow Coalition" to the contrary. This and other chimeras are based more on media hype and personality cults than on any real attempt to make a grassroots-democratic politics.

Be that as it may, the first tentative steps toward the formation of an independent movement are now being taken by social ecologists and other independent leftists currently organizing a Left Green Network in the United States and Canada. That being the case, the issues of strategy, principle, and praxis raised by the question of nonviolence are better resolved through a spirited debate at the outset than through bitter factional confrontations in the heat of a long-overdue struggle with the institutional powers of the present system. History is strewn with the corpses of social movements that postponed inevitable internal struggles in the interests of "unity," only to have those struggles explode at precisely the wrong moment, when there was neither the rime nor the opportunity for passionate, reasoned debate.

The arguments and controversies precipitated by the social ecology versus "deep ecology" debate, the emergence of a social ecofeminism, the publication of Toward a New Politics by the Vermont Greens, and the ongoing organization of the Left Green Network as an organized educational and direct-action tendency all represent welcome steps both in the direction of the freewheeling debate proposed here and in the creation of an independent,
anti-authoritarian left determined to advance a new politics in both theory and praxis as a real alternative to the insanity (and banality) of our times.

It is my hope that the present work, by reopening debate on the question of nonviolence and the right of self-defense, will serve to further increase this ferment of ideas and help spark a more thoroughgoing examination of the meanings behind the Green "pillars." And it is also my hope that this ferment will lead to purposeful political and direct-action campaigns by a renewed American left inspired by the principles of Green politics and the vision of a free, ecological society.

NOTES


(5) Vermont Greens, op. cit.

(6) Ibid.


(10) Die Grünen, op. cit.