

Book Review:

The Enemy of Nature: The end of capitalism or the end of the world?

by Joel Kovel (Zed Books Ltd., 2002)

By John Rowntree

Joel Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature* is not just another book on the ecological crisis. It is the keystone to understanding the crisis and what we can do about it.

Kovel is a noted scholar, author, public speaker, and green activist. He is the Alger Hiss Professor of Social Studies at Bard College in Annandale, New York, and has published widely on psychoanalysis, psychiatry, politics, and ecology. *The Enemy of Nature* is his seventh book.

Kovel first explains how the ecological crisis is not about any one type of ecosystem damage, such as global warming, species loss, resource depletion, or toxic pollution of the biosphere. It is about the fact that all of these things are happening together—now. He then shows how the capitalist economy is itself responsible for this widespread degradation of our ecosystems and threat to life on earth.

In exposing capitalism's responsibility for the ecological crisis, Kovel reveals the underlying unity of the red (socialist) and green (environmentalist) critiques of capitalism. His approach builds on work begun over 15 years ago by James O'Connor (UC Santa Cruz) and his associates. O'Connor did path-breaking work exploring the ecological contradictions of capitalism in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, a leading international journal of socialist ecology. *The Enemy of Nature* represents a synthesis of the many contributions to this red-

green project.

While reds have focused on the exploitation of labor, greens have focused on the exploitation of nature. But Kovel sees the domination of labor and the domination of nature as simply different aspects of the reign of capital. So human liberation is integral to living in harmony with nature, and getting rid of capitalism is the joint agenda of reds and greens.

Kovel thus challenges those who focus on labor to embrace the ecological and those who focus the environment to embrace socialism. But in this deeply philosophical work, Kovel then engages the reader in an exploration of the common roots of Marxism, ecofeminism, and the philosophy of nature. Capitalism grew out of the ancient rupture between humanity and nature, between men and women, and between social classes. Drawing together these philosophical roots of capitalism and the ecocatastrophe we now face, Kovel concludes that any path out of capitalism must be ecofeminist.

Kovel then goes beyond a critique of capitalism and challenges the reader to envision ecosocialism as the alternative to capitalism. He explores what an ecosocialist society might look like and what sort of practical steps we can take to get there.

At the heart of this participatory project of ecosocialist transformation is a radical expansion of

democracy. This is not a call for the expansion of capitalism's system of electoral democracy. It is a radical democratization of society—in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our communities, in our workplaces, and, indeed, in every aspect of our lives. Such democratic empowerment is both the means and the end of ecosocialist transformation.

Every small step that enhances human values over money values contributes to the resistance to capitalism and to the building of ecosocialism. Such steps include organizing labor, building cooperatives, supporting community-based enterprises, establishing local credit unions, creating alternative local currencies, and making radical media.

The challenge is to build ecosocialism in advance of the ecological breakdown developing in the wake of capitalist expansion. Capitalism is the enemy of nature. There are only two alternatives: the end of capitalism or the end of the world.

Reprinted from Because People Matter, March/April, 2004.