

# Equal Time for Freethought

## Interview with Joel Kovel by Barry F. Seidman

Aired April 15 and 22, 2007

Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

### Part 1 (aired April 15, 2007)

**Barry F. Seidman:** As the world's scientists converge on the all-too-real crisis of global warming, even while right-wingers and the Bush administration continue to spin the crisis into a left-wing conspiracy (probably headed up by Al Gore), fewer discussions are taking place concerning the root causes of our ecological dilemma. Conservatives who are willing to acknowledge what science is telling us, and even those whom exhibit a real sense of urgency, are afraid of what might happen to the economy if we go at environmentalism full force. Mainstream liberals like Al Gore have been working hard to dispel this fear by assuring us that the economy will get even stronger, not weaker, if we take care of our planet.

But what if the economy is at the very core of this crisis? Al Gore and others are to be commended for doing their best within their current mindset, that of big government social democracy. The scientists certainly need to be commended for not bending to political or corporate pressure, telling us the truth about the health of our planet. Still, like the proverbial elephant in the room, most people are ignoring the root cause of not only global warming, but of the entire ecological crisis.

Today, we will be speaking with [Dr. Joel Kovel](#), author of [\*The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?\*](#), about what is missing from the mainstream dialogue, as we perhaps enter a new age of environmentalism. If we really want to reverse the state of the planet before it is too late, more people need to be addressing the roots of the current ecological crisis. This special two-part program is in recognition of Earth Day 2007.

Dr. Joel Kovel is an American politician, academic writer, and ecosocialist. A practicing psychiatrist and psychoanalyst until the mid-1980s, he has lectured in psychiatry, anthropology, political science and communications studies and has published many books on his work in psychiatry, psychoanalysis and political activism. His first book, [\*White Racism, a Psychohistory\*](#), was released in 1972 and nominated for a National Book Award in religion and philosophy. Other works have focused on politics and ecosocialism, including [\*Against the State of Nuclear Terror\*](#) from 1983 and 1994's [\*Red Hunting in the Promised Land\*](#), a study of anti-Communist repression in America. He is currently working on a book entitled [\*Beyond Zionism\*](#), which will deal with the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Kovel is a member of the [Green Party of the United States](#) and ran for President on the Green ticket opposing Ralph Nader in 2000.

Welcome, Joel Kovel, to Equal Time for Freethought!

**Joel Kovel:** Hi.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Before we begin, I'm aware you are working on a new edition of *The Enemy of Nature*, which will discuss, I'm assuming, the post-9/11 world, including the full blossoming of the neoconservative agenda for the world economy, and just about everything else over the last five years. So feel free to bring us up to date as we go through your theses.

Off the top, I have received several interesting reactions to your book's title, as I've

carried it around with me in the last few weeks preparing for this program. Many people who have a decent understanding of environmental issues and global warming, which aren't as many as we'd like, are willing to listen to scientists — or Al Gore, for instance, in his latest movie — talk about the crisis. But in your book, you've done something most haven't, by discussing the root cause of our ecological crisis beyond the pure science of the matter. Can you, for a moment, introduce the basic premise or premises of your book, and what it is that you're trying to get across?

**Joel Kovel:** Well certainly. The premise is that science can show us how the crisis unfolds, but it has no insight into what drives it. And to do that, you have to study human society, our society, and its relationship to nature. And you have to study it internally and historically. And when you do that, you come up with the answer, which I think most people that I've spoken to sort of intuitively know, which is that the culprit is capitalism, and we have to deal with that. And if we don't deal with that, then the crisis will take us down.

So that's the thesis in a nutshell. And of course it has many ramifications.

**Barry F. Seidman:** How did the ecological crisis begin? Where are we right now in this crisis, and why has it been almost impossible to do anything about it?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, you have to look very far back to get the beginnings. Obviously, any historical phenomenon can be traced back to the beginning of time. But in this case, it is important to realize that because of the way we are as a species, namely, we're really part of nature whose function is to rearrange nature and to introduce new forms into nature, which we call "production". And because we do so via social organization, and because our social organization is prone to all kinds of perturbations, to say the least. There have been irregularities in humanity's relationship to nature which go back as far as records can be traced. I mean, paleolithic hunters caused the extinction of many species, for instance, because of the wanton way they hunted. The first rivering civilizations in the Mesopotamia had periods of extinction because they used irrigation, and that irrigation brought down salt from the mountains and ruined the land that they were growing the crops on; you know, Easter Island fell apart because the social organization in the form of religion led them to cut down all the trees to move the great monolithic stones around, their objects of worship, and so on and so forth. So this is a story as old as humanity, and you can find references in Plato to it and so on. It's a fascinating account.

And it's only in the very modern era, where first of all, capitalism and capitalist industrialization takes over, that you begin to get the capacity to exponentially increase production, and also to increase therefore the damages done by production. And that this becomes a factor early on in the 19th century, although only a few visionary people could see it happening as such. But by the mid-20th century, it began to become a very serious factor, and you began to get evidence of, and people talking about, the breakdown not just in one corner of the world or the other, but in the entire global ecology. And so that, it starts surfacing into sort of a planetary awareness begins in 1970, which has a paradoxical effect: on the one hand, it's the beginning of the modern environmental movement in that decade. On the other hand, it's also the burgeoning of the ecological destruction, particularly with worldwide economic crisis and the neoliberal reaction to that crisis and globalization, which signify that.

So we began to get — by the late seventies and on thereafter, and certainly speeding up all the time as the global economy reveals its innermost tendencies — you began to get

this widespread planetary breakdown. Now you have species succumbing from the effects of industrialization thousands of miles away; you have entire ecosystems across the planet, particularly obviously the climactic ecosystem, the atmosphere, out of control. And of course the atmosphere is something that now people are focusing on, but they shouldn't focus on it to the exclusion of other elements. It's the entirety of humanity's relation to nature.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. And we'll talk a little bit more about that entirety.

**Joel Kovel:** By the way, I forget. What was the last part of the question?

**Barry F. Seidman:** The last part of it was: why do you think it's been almost impossible to do anything about it?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, it has been almost impossible because of the ideological factor, in other words like hegemony, words that signify the way in which the reigning mode of production, capitalism, controls not just the state formations throughout the world but the ideological systems, the cultural systems, the media, a great deal of the scientific apparatus and the like; you have to take into account the entirety of it, and the fact that with the embrace of the global economy by neoliberal capital, beginning particularly in the 1980s, you now have a sort of a monster that looms over society and gives people a sense of impunity. And the fact that their lives are being lived for them by these gigantic forces, and that it's so huge that there's nothing that people can do; and you might as well play along with it. Because the upsides: capitalism provides a lot of wealth; in any event, it defines the condition of everyday life, and it combines the work that 99% of people do, and so it goes. So that it's just a measure of just how powerful the system of production is that it produces the inability to contend with it. One other factor is, of course, that both intellectually and emotionally, this is a very difficult idea to get your head around. That is to say that the entire planetary ecology is in some respects disintegrating and going out of control. I mean, this is very both frightening and also very hard to comprehend.

**Barry F. Seidman:** For a species has been around for three million years. It's so new that it's gonna take a slow learning curve.

**Joel Kovel:** Which we can't afford.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Which we can't afford at this point because of exponential growth.

All right, let's break it down a bit. Capitalism is about capital. Many people think they know what capital is, but perhaps not its relationship to nature. How have you discussed this in your work?

**Joel Kovel:** Yeah, it's hard to define in a way, because it's such a spectral and abstract notion, such a fundamental displacement, that we can talk about it as when production became transferred from the making of things to the making of money as the central feature. And consequently, land became no longer the foundation of the economy, but rather, the ability to invest money, which gave all kinds of fluidity and opened up possibilities for the expansion that we now see. As long as the economy is grounded in a

use-value regime, that is to say, what can be made out of nature, then there's a certain built-in equilibrium. It's always irregular, but never smooth, always open to new kinds of interesting vicissitudes. But the fact is that if production is primarily for use, then you're primarily limited by the constraints of the physical world.

Whereas once production becomes centered around the making of money and the reinvesting of money; once the production process is centered around the production of capital as such, rather than the production of things, then you're on this unrelenting spiral. Because capital is not a real entity; it's an idea in the mind of a real person, like any other ideas. I mean, you can imagine all kinds of things that don't actually exist in the actual world, and capital is one of them. Yet the way you imagine that drives production, and makes all kinds of possibilities come to life. And there's no inherent limit to money. It's quantity. It's just numbers. You can always add another zero.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. The general public might not understand this quite. They still assume that we're talking about capitalism as in making goods. Not for its own sake. Not in creating more capital. How is that easily explained to the general public, that capitalism isn't about making goods, but it's about boosting its own longevity?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, you can look at the endless drumbeat calling for growth, economic growth, as an end in itself. And you look at growth, we're talking really about the growth of money, not the growth of things, the notion that the quantitative element must continually expand. Now, more down-to-Earth, where people should be able to appreciate, is by looking at the financial pages of any leading newspaper, following the fortunes of various companies. You'll see that what always counts is the profit, or the rate of profit. It never matters what is made, but only insofar as what is made increases the profitability. And the great disciplinary force in the economy is the stock exchange, which punishes those corporations which fail to not just make a profit but to expand their profit or expand their market share and the like. So that we can see very directly in the workings of the economy that what counts — literally, not just metaphorically — is the money term. It's not what is made, it's the rate at which it's made; it's the way in which you offset the competition from others. And so the rat race, a rat race it is, is the chasing after the money.

**Barry F. Seidman:** One final question on this aspect. You said at one time, capitalism was about making things, before it became about making money, making capital.

**Joel Kovel:** Well, the economy was about making things, and as it became about making money, it turned into a capitalist economy.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Ohhhhhh, OK. So it's inherent within capitalism to be about profit, rather than to be about an economy of making things. So we can't go back, in other words, to a pristine time when we were just talking about an economy of making goods.

**Joel Kovel:** Well, you can go forward into such an economy. There's no reason why the world can't run itself on that and on those grounds. One of the great curses of our time, and it is a manifestation both of the difficulty people have in realizing the scope of all this and also the kind of ideological drumbeat that's being pounded into their heads, is that there's no alternative to capitalism.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative."

**Joel Kovel:** That's it. T.I.N.A. There is no alternative. This is the goddess that you must worship, bow down before and the like. And people are all too ready to do that. And they look at the failed systems of the Soviet Union, and say, "Well, that didn't work, therefore there is no alternative to capitalism." Which is just pure nonsense

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. I have some questions on communism and socialism a little bit later. But let me just stick with the United States right now, and maybe even Europe a little bit. Many liberals today — not right-wing libertarians or conservatives mind you, but mainstream liberals — argue that we can still regulate capitalism. Some argue that we need to breathe fresh air into social democracy, or that we need a new New Deal. What is your view on state-regulated capitalism?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, actually, at the end of the book *The Enemy of Nature*, I have a little epilogue, and I say, "Y'know, the arguments in this book are either right or wrong; they're correct and capitalism can't regulate itself, or that I'm wrong and capitalism can." No, it's not as if capitalism hasn't had a chance at doing this; it's been around for 500 years and it shows no sign of being able to regulate itself. Maybe it will figure this out. I'm not saying it can't. I'm saying there are tendencies which I've explained in the book, which show why it doesn't happen, but none of those tendencies is iron necessity; it could actually turn itself around. It hasn't. If it does turn itself around, then we would have a different world.

**Barry F. Seidman:** I'm not necessarily talking about self-regulation; I'm talking about state, forced regulation, as in social democracy or Keynesianism.

**Joel Kovel:** Well, I don't divorce the forms of the state which occur at any given phase of the capitalist system from the economy. I mean, they're always interpenetrated with each other. It's a whole organism, which can or cannot regulate itself. And the state can impose regulatory forces. But we can say why that's unlikely to happen. I just want to make it very clear that neither I nor anybody else knows whether this can be done. I don't think it can be done, and in any event, I think it's really important to interrogate that, and not to just accept the pabulum that is being forced down people's throats, saying "Don't worry, we have it all figured out; we have all these magnificent institutions that explain how to run the economy". And meanwhile, the economy continually runs on its own internal logic and drives everything else before it. It hasn't happened. And more than that, in my view, capitalism is a very destructive system and it's a very corrupting system. I have no love for it. I think it annihilates the human spirit. And let us not forget: nobody has yet figured out a way for capitalism to produce general wealth. It always produces differences between rich and poor.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. Very localized wealth.

**Joel Kovel:** Yeah. It produces a lot of localized wealth; it adds tremendous wealth to the upper edge of society, and then tremendous division between upper and lower. And that itself makes society chaotic. Because then the society is preoccupied with policing and disciplining the poor, and protecting the rich from the poor, and building gated communities, and all the rest of the stuff which fragments human community.

**Barry F. Seidman:** So you would argue that it might not just have been political figures like Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan that brought down social democracy or New Deal democracy in this country or in Sweden, for instance, but something inherent within capitalism itself?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, yes. I mean, a tendency towards crisis. For instance, the never-ending, cyclical nature of capitalism which eventually brings forward its more rapacious and aggressive elements. I'm not saying that social democracy can't work; I'm just saying that it hasn't. I'm saying that the more aggressive and rapacious forms of capital, like the United States and now Russia, tend to drive the others before them. Because so long as the system is (a) grounded in competition, which nobody has figured out a way of getting out of; and (b) grounded in growth, and exploitation of humanity and nature, than the more aggressive the capital, the more aggressive the state, the more leading a role it's gonna play.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. Let's get back a little bit toward the environment. Segments of our audience might wanna know if this is more than just mere political polemics. I know that some won't even believe the science, and think global warming is some kind of left-wing conspiracy. But even liberals might call you to task on capitalism as the cause. So is there empirical scientific evidence which confirms what you argue concerning what capitalism is doing to nature?

**Joel Kovel:** In the forthcoming second edition, for example, I have a graph which has been prepared by a friend and colleague at the University of Michigan, an economist named Jose Tapia, who shows that if it's carbon emissions you're worried about, you can track carbon emissions and show that the only predictor of carbon emissions on a planetary scale, or national scale, whatever, is the Gross Domestic Product, the Gross National Product. In other words, it's the sum total of economic activity which determines the emissions of carbon. Which obviously, shouldn't be a shocking conclusion, since it's apparent that the more cars you have on the road, the more money is being made from the cars, but also the more gas is being consumed, and the more materials and all the rest of it. It's not an easy argument to make, because there is no immediate linkage between economic and ecological processes. The former condition the latter, and the latter condition the former. And there are crises at both levels. But there are certain tendencies within the capitalist system.

One of them, my friend and mentor James O'Connor developed, which is called the second contradiction of capitalism, which show, in considerable detail, it can be demonstrated that in order to advance profits, capital has to degrade the conditions of its own production. This is nature, the bodies of workers, and also infrastructures, and this in turn cuts into profitability. So that there's a continuous crisis being forced upon capitalism by its effort to put profit before all other considerations. You can go down the line, and you can show it empirically. That is to say, you can trace any given insult to the environment, and then try to trace back the nexus of causes, and so inductively you can show that whenever you do this, you come upon some factor of profitability.

I do that in the book in detail for the Bhopal catastrophe in India in 1984; this plant producing methyl isocyanate blew up thanks to negligence, and so on. But the negligence and so on was not human error. It was directed by cost-cutting. It was directed by the agencies of the economy as these affected the Union Carbide company, which was the one that ran the plant. I go in that example in great detail in the book. But there's almost no

instance where you can't find this happening. That is to say, whether you're talking about bioengineering; whether you're talking about the auto industry. More profit is made out of SUVs than is made out of minicars, and so on and so forth. No matter where you look, you're gonna see more and more of this. So inductively you can show it, in as many instances as you like.

And then deductively, you can show that the very essentials of capitalist production is to increase the value added into the product, which is the exchange value that Marx talks about, surplus value, that comes out of the exploitation of labor. And the exploitation of labor is enhanced by the introduction of machinery, which raises the rate of surplus value, at least to gain competitive advantages. And this is an iron tendency within capitalism.

**Barry F. Seidman:** There is an argument, in fact it was in Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and other people will say that they try to dispel the supposed conservative argument that to help the environment, you have to destroy the economy. And the argument in the film is that that's not true, and that in fact there are many things we can do that's not going to hurt the economy. But it doesn't sound exactly like that's what you're saying.

**Joel Kovel:** Gore is a little slippery on this point. By the way, I admire what he's done in making people wake up to this threat, it's a good thing. But he does so as Al Gore, which is to say, as somebody who's spent his lifetime carrying water for the lords of capital; doesn't really change that. As he says, we can have a better economy by countering global warming, and make a lot of jobs, and create a lot of wealth. Well, first of all, I also agree that you can have a lot of jobs by creating a carbon-free economy and countering global warming. I was saying this back in '98 when I ran for the U. S. Senate against [Chuck] Schumer and [Al] D'Amato; of course lost badly. And I said it again in 2000, when I ran for the presidential nomination against Nader, saying the same things. But the kind of jobs one is talking about have to be understood. Are these jobs within capitalism or are these jobs what would be called freely associated labor, people actually really working creatively and expressing their full human capacities?

Now, the kinds of work that people would be doing to create a better world, an ecologically sound, sane world, would lead to a great deal of very creative work. I'm quite optimistic about that, in contrast to the vast amount of work that's done under capitalism, where a person is just a tiny cog in an immense mechanical apparatus. So yeah, that's good. But Gore doesn't specify the kinds of jobs, because he's not interested in the class relationships that underlie society. I say you have to have a socialist organization of work. And you're gonna have many jobs. You're gonna have many people building light rail systems, and people creating new forms of energy utilization and so on. That's wonderful. But you can't do this under the existing regime. And if you do it, you have to do it under what I would call freely associated labor that's applied ecocentrically. In other words, through ecosocialism.

And the real giveaway for Gore is he says that we're gonna create a lot of wealth. You see, the Chinese have these wonderful cars that can consume much less fuel than American cars; you see, it can be done. But he's not saying this. Oh my God, now the Chinese are going to make as many cars as we are. What's gonna inhibit the making of cars? The wealth that they're creating by having sound systems of production is turned into making more and more cars.

**Barry F. Seidman:** So it's the quantity that's as much of a problem as the quality.

**Joel Kovel:** The quantitative factor. The endless expansion.

## **Part 2 (aired April 22, 2007)**

**Barry F. Seidman:** Eventually we get to, and we will get to your discussion of ecosocialism. Let's take the first half of that word: ecology. What is it, as you referred to in your book?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, it should be contrasted to the notion of the environment. People talk widely about ecology and environment as the same, but they really should parse them differently. And environment means something that's outside ourselves, and that we just use as we like, are resources that we breathe in, breathe out; it's kind of a materialist concept. But ecology is a point of view which regards all life as interdependent and interconnected and forming of ecosystems, which are themselves metastable collections of entities in nature. Now the key point to realize is that we are part of nature. And therefore, we have to apply the notion of ecosystem and ecology to humanity also. So when we're talking about ecosocialism or ecocentric worldview, we're saying what our civilization needs to do is to move from the model of making things and money, where man is over nature. Our whole relationship to nature is predicated on our separation from nature.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Well, there's a few possible reasons for this. Could you just talk a little bit about gender and religion, and what the relationship is to our understanding of our place on the Earth and in the universe?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, the first form of difference that people relate to is the difference between the genders or the sexes, however you want to construct that. But the fact of the matter is that people become aware at the beginning of their lives that there are two versions of human beings. Which is wonderful, of course; I'm all for it. But the fact of the matter is that that difference can turn into a point of domination. And it does turn into a point of domination, as I trace it; I'm not alone here in understanding, in the tradition of what you might call ecofeminism. In fact, the first form of domination is male over female; and that undoubtedly occurs when male hunting bands stop hunting, or take time out from hunting animals and start hunting other people. And now the masculine control over the means of violence and the technologies of death and the like, have turned into socially malignant ends. And you begin to get the expropriation of female labor, female sexuality and reproductive power. And this leads to patriarchy and the like, but it also leads to a notion where the Earth is conceived of as basically female, and the human being is conceived of as basically male. And this kind of bifurcation is something that inhabits human society. Whereas, the true human being is the male, male fertility rites. The very book of Genesis, where even the male gives birth to the female, and so everything comes from the male; and the female is near nature.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Well, I've had anthropologists on who say it is part of society. But it seems to be more part of human nature post our nomadic hunter times, when we became agricultural and more centralized. Which is a much more recent time. And 99% of

our nomadic hunter-gatherer existence was much more equal between gender. Which leads me to a more basic question than just even gender or religion, but about human nature. We've had on our show evolutionary psychologists, for instance, who seem to have adopted a Hobbesian view of human nature: lazy, greedy, selfish. Quite gene-centered, or nature trumps nurture. And we've also had on biologists and anthropologists who've argued against this view of human nature, and credit the natural human-made environment or nurture as more important. What is your take on human nature, regarding your work?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, I think first of all, we all need to explore that dimension. And in fact, we all do. Everybody has intuitive notion here. My view is — and it's essential, because it really is critical — if human nature is one way, then capitalism makes sense, but if it's another, then it's an aberration. My view is that we have innumerable potentials, given the fact that we transform nature. And we are capable of transforming nature in any which way. And Hitler is an authentic representation of humanity, but so is St. Francis. And so the possibilities within humanity are innumerable; and that it makes little or no sense to abstract from them, to say "this is the actual essence." We have to say the actual essence is that humanity is an open book, an open project. People who posit a Hobbesian view of nature are basically abstracting from the given society: this is the way it seems to me, and therefore this is the way it is in essence. But that notion is basically applied to the prevailing notion of what a human being is, which is to say, a male. And they very rarely look, for instance, at the behavior of mothers when they do that. They don't take into account that there are also human beings who do a lot of nurturing and caring and holding and tending to the young and to sustain life, and they look at the ones who dominate life, or take life, because those are the ones in power, social power, and those are the ones who pay philosophers, so to speak, and reward them, and publish their books.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. I mean, exactly it's capitalism that published their books. Plus, they're extrapolating from the current society, which they think is long-lived, but is really narrow in the longevity of humanity. And they apply that to all of humanity.

**Joel Kovel:** One last thing. I've been around a number of years now, and I'm fascinated with this question. The other thing I would emphasize in saying who human beings are is that we also are defined by our inner world and imagination. And that it's not just what we do to nature but it's also the ideas we have which have to be understood as integral to them. I mean, every act of labor, Marx wrote, is in the mind of the worker before it's in the transformation of some part of nature. And the inner mythopoetic or spiritual aspect of human beings is very integral here. And I don't mean in a necessarily good way. I mean that people are also fundamentally very driven by fantasies. I'm a materialist, but not a materialist that divorces the inner from outer world. It's just a materialist means that the totality of inner and outer worlds has to be drawn into any understanding of human beings. And I always liked what the philosopher Blaise Pascal said when he said, "human beings are so necessarily mad", that is to say, crazy, "that not to be mad would be but another form of madness".

**Barry F. Seidman:** Before we get into the solutions you offer, on how we can get out of this mess we're in, you talk about some of the efforts on the left, which you feel have either failed or have not gone far enough, such as reform or working within the system, volunteerism. In Green economics, which I guess you are a part of in a sense, running for the Green Party in 2000. What is your argument here about what has not gone right so far?

**Joel Kovel:** Well yeah, it's a complicated point, and I am sometimes rather polemical in order to sharpen the argument. But recognizing that nobody has a privileged position here, or a blueprint, and that we just have to go further. So again using Marx, we have to ruthlessly criticize where we are at and where we have been, including myself, everybody. And to me, the fundamental touchstone is the degree to which folks will take the critique of capitalism seriously enough. And we think of capitalism as not just an economic critique; it's also a critique that rests on these gender assumptions and all the rest. I was a doctor, a physician and a psychiatrist for a long time, psychoanalyst. And as a physician, you have this notion that you have to see what's the underlying disease. There are symptoms, and then there's a disease formation, and you have to see what really is going on. I think that the touchstone of whether an ecophilosophy or ecopolitics is gonna be valuable is the degree to which it appropriates the insight that capitalism is the driving force. And without reducing it, because capitalism itself has to be explained. It's not like capitalism is just sort of dropping from the heavens, it arises out of many thousands of years of humanity, and our own alienation as a species. We understand all that. But it takes on a capitalist form in the modern world, which is money and expansion and all the other things that we talked about earlier. And ecopolitics has to, in my view, comprehend that. And one of the main implications of that is that ecopolitics should be socialist politics.

Now, socialist doesn't have any magic to it. It just means an orientation so that you're going to say this has to confront capitalism, has to overcome capitalism, has to make for a post-capitalist world in which the society produces in a different form other than the capitalist mode. And that opens unto vistas. And one very, very just quick touchstone; I know you have another question to ask me. Most other ecophilosophies and ecopolitics are not primarily concerned about what we do to the external world and nature and the environment, although I certainly am concerned about that. But I'm most concerned about how we organize our own lives and how human beings are freed to express their powers, as against being alienated and the current system. I believe that people who are free and associate their labor that way will build an ecologically rational world.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Many people who listen to WBAI understand why the form of socialism which took place in Russia and China failed, the lack of democracy and totalitarianism. Some do not see the same problems, say, with Cuba or Venezuela, there's some debate on that here. It seems you're arguing that even if capitalism is banished, which I know it wasn't in post-Stalin Russia or modern China. Holding onto markets and bypassing democracy is not socialism. So what is socialism? Before we get to ecosocialism, what is socialism to you, and also, what is democracy to you?

**Joel Kovel:** Yes. Well, I mean socialism is just an extension of the principle of democracy. And frankly, I'm critical of Marx in some ways; it's a complex point, I can take it up, but I basically follow Marx in many of these points. And Marx writes in several places, and he says that, in the *Communist Manifesto* for instance, it is written Marx and Engels, "We shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." People just browse over that and don't think about it, but that's a very profound statement. I mean, socialism is the condition of freely associated labor, which says that we're collective, we're social animals. But the freely associated labor is that the foundation of that has to be the expression of that spark within each person, and not the subordination of that person to an impersonal outside, whether that outside is called "history"

or "the state" or "the party" or anything of that sort. So fundamentally, the notion of freedom that we're talking about, but freedom is not the same as license or liberty, because freedom is a function of association. If humanity is a collection of isolated particles, it's basically dead and dying. Of course that's one way of looking at capitalism, breaking the social bonds between people, or replacing them with fascistic bonds and the like. But it's the free, organic flowering of human beings, that's what socialism is.

And under those circumstances, it's quite possible to show that many of the 20th century socialisms, which I would call first-epoch socialisms, it's not a bad term. Actually got off to a pretty good start, but they lost their way. And it's no great surprise, considering how the people who made those revolutions were socialized by the previous system of production. How hard it is to transform a given society. And of course the lack of development of the societies involved, which is to say the lack of democratic development, the lack of civil society, the fact that people were not accustomed to self-governance, in other words they were accustomed to taking orders. I mean, Russia and China were societies that hadn't really gotten very far out of feudalism at the time that their revolutions took place and the like. And finally — not so finally, but anyhow, a very important point — is the behavior of the capitalist powers. And the necessity that these countries had to both deal with the never-ending efforts on the part of very powerful capitalist systems to destroy them, and also having to adapt to global markets if they were going to get anywhere.

And I would say something about Cuba in this respect, because Cuba is I think the one country that was by no means going far enough, but still has gone to some degree into a genuine socialist development. And it is back, for all of its many, many weaknesses, the only country on Earth that has anything approaching a sustainable system.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Healthcare and the like. But it's not a democracy in the way we define democracy.

**Joel Kovel:** As I said, it has a long way to go. No, it's not a democracy as we define democracy, but remember our definition of democracy is pathetic.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Well, that's also what I wanted to mention, because we're talking about representative democracy, which is not an inclusive democracy. It's not a participatory democracy.

**Joel Kovel:** Never forget that Cuba has the only country in any nation-state on Earth to ever have developed an agroecology. Basically, a national system of agriculture that makes major strides towards ecological sanity. The only country to ever do that. And it's no great mystery. They had to do it, they had to starve or die; and also, they had no capitalist sector, agribusiness, to stop them. So they did it. And that just shows us what can be done if one keeps a certain socialist orientation.

**Barry F. Seidman:** I don't want to get into labels too much, but in closing on this part of our discussion. You're talking about a socialism, obviously, minus capitalism, but also minus vanguard parties or state powers and the like. Is this a libertarian socialism, or what some people call anarchism? Or is it not quite the same?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, first of all, "libertarian" and "anarchism" are not necessarily the

same either. All these terms tend to be fought over. But to my understanding of them, I think there are elements of all those notions that I have a lot of affinity towards. There's a substantial convergence between two great dreams of left thought, socialism and anarchism; thanks, unhappily, to the ecological crisis, which has undermined the grounds of difference them. On the one hand, organized labor, the foundation of the socialist system is now in such disarray, and that socialists are now forced to necessarily look at a wider notion of production and the making of the world. And anarchists, at the same time, are now forced to look much more seriously at the capitalist system as a whole, and the ways in which we can go beyond it. And what we're looking at, I think, is the development of a world in which there are many points of breakdown in the capitalist ecumene, and some of these are ecological and some of these are political. Or rather, they're all both, but in different proportions. And you see, this is like failed state formations, and ruptures in the system, and that within these zones, people are reconstituting ecologically socialist forms of life, which are ecologically anarchist if you like. I'm not particularly interested in labels, but I'm working in the tradition, heuristically, valuable to talk about.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Why don't we move into that now, finally then, ecosocialism or ecoanarchism? What is it, how would it work, and why do you argue it's not utopian?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, it *is* utopian.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Whoops.

**Joel Kovel:** In the sense that you need to postulate what is not in order to direct yourself. One needs a lodestar to navigate. To see something that's beyond the given.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Right. Oscar Wilde's comment that when humanity lands there, that's when progress is made. ["A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail." — *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*] You know, we always have to strive for utopianism. I meant that in a negative sense, the way people use it when they hear things that are so unfamiliar to them, they would call this utopian.

**Joel Kovel:** It's not about some kind of massive program of social engineering and waiting for the conditions to mature. It's about taking openings as they appear and building from them. So it's generated from within, and from the ground, you might say.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Something we can do.

**Joel Kovel:** Autoctonous. It comes from places, and whether these are community gardens; whether there's zones like Chiapas in Mexico. I think, for instance, the EZLN in Mexico is a wonderful example of the kinds of things that constitute an ecosocialist formation. It's outside the given state; it's grounded in freely constituted labor; it involves tremendous changes in gender relations and the like. And it's consciously ecological. I mean, they're trying to build a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. But that occurs here and there. And there are different opportunities in different places. In other words, in media collectives, or even in radical labor unions. Labor unions are beginning to see the difference.

And I think that the struggle against global warming, the struggle against the carbon regime, is going to unite people from all around the world. That the watchword of the path to ecosocialism will be through carbon justice, the struggle for a rational carbon economy that's not what we have now, which is driving the planet to destruction, but which is grounded in free appropriation by people of the means of existence.

**Barry F. Seidman:** So you're saying ecosocialism is happening here and now, under various levels, and ultimately, a planetary ecosocialism would be, I guess, the extension of what we see occasionally here?

**Joel Kovel:** Well yes. There's a listserv where you can look it up, [Capitalist Climate and Capitalism](#), and it has the slogan: "ecosocialism or barbarism". There is no other alternative. That's where it is beginning to take shape. There's a [Wikipedia entry](#) for it, and soon it will be in the dictionary. And someday, either reigning — well, reigning's not the right word — it will be a way that people will live.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Reigning's definitely not the right word.

**Joel Kovel:** A way that we live or, we will not have a future. That's the way I see it.

**Barry F. Seidman:** One last question about ecosocialism. You talk about the ecosocialist political party. What is that?

**Joel Kovel:** Well, first of all it means that we're not ready for such a party. We want small party-like formations. Green parties around the world. The key thing of ecosocialism: it has to be grounded in communities and forms of production.

**Barry F. Seidman:** It has to remain democratic.

**Joel Kovel:** It has to remain democratic.

**Barry F. Seidman:** Otherwise, it becomes a party like the vanguard party.

**Joel Kovel:** Absolutely. It has to remain democratic, which is given by the basic principle of free association of labor. That is to say, where freely associated labor is the foundation of it, then that has to be carried forward into the making of the revolution itself. And you can't have the revolution made for you by some external force. It has to come from within. The human powers that are slumbering and alienated and the like. But you do need some kind of formation that provides a common vision and also forms of communication between these spontaneously developing foci around the world. Whether we're talking about people in the Nigerian delta rebelling against Shell Oil; or you're talking about Mexicans in Chiapas; whether you're talking about productive communes in the United States, or Switzerland or whatever; you need some way in which the common language and the form of communication can be developed. And of course, you have now technologies that can help you do that; I'm not anti-technology, I'm just anti-capital.

**Barry F. Seidman:** All right, well thank you, Joel Kovel, for being on Equal Time for

Freethought today. That's a lot of stuff for people to swallow. I advise them to get your book, *The Enemy of Nature*. Are you gonna keep the same subtitle with the new edition?

**Joel Kovel:** Yes, I think it will be the same subtitle.

**Barry F. Seidman:** So that's *The Enemy of Nature* ...

**Joel Kovel:** ... *The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?*