

Socialist States and the Environment

‘A fascinating account. For too long we have tended to demonise socialist states, this book shows that to overcome the climate crisis, there are positive lessons to be learnt, from Lenin’s promotion of conservation to Cuba’s achievements in promoting ecological policymaking.’

—Derek Wall, former International Coordinator of the Green Party of England and Wales, and Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London

‘Many people have realised that ecological sustainability cannot be achieved under capitalism. But how about (eco-) socialism? For everyone who is interested in a sustainable future and a new society without oppression, I strongly recommend this book.’

—Minqi Li, Professor of Economics, University of Utah and author of *China and the Twenty-First-Century Crisis*

‘In our current moment of a near total co-optation of environmentalism where billionaires and military forces are looked to for solutions to the problems they create, Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro provides a serious, data-driven, and sober look at what socialist states have been able to do for the environment.’

—Justin Podur, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, York University

‘Sharply erudite ... takes us on a brilliant guided tour of the environmental programs of socialist states and a variety of community-led initiatives. Among them, Thomas Sankara’s Burkina Faso, Cuba and its agroecology, the PRC up to 1978, the USSR and many of the Eastern European countries up to 1990, various African people’s republics through 1992, and, despite their largely privatised economies, the Bolivias, Venezuelas and Vietnams of today.’

—Rob Wallace, author of *Big Farms Make Big Flu*

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Lessons for Ecosocialist Futures

Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
1 Introduction	1
2 A Brief History of Socialist States and Ecosocialism	34
3 The Poverty of Comparisons	54
4 Environmental Impacts in Context	102
5 Reckoning with Contradictions to Build Ecosocialism	195
Postface	227
<i>References</i>	229
<i>Index</i>	257

Preface

Down from Mars mountain, in the Biellese Alps of the north-western Italian peninsula, there runs an intermittent stream, the Elv (Elvo in Italian). It is swollen by the Olobbia, Oremo, Viona and Ingagna creeks along its way to become a tributary of the river Cervo, among the many feeders of the Po. Long ago, through multiple phases of glacial erosion in the Early Pleistocene (one to two million years ago), these and other now bygone streams carried and dumped auriferous pebbles, gravel and sand along their courses to form a bulging, oblong strip of land, a couple of river terraces layered on top of each other.

This is the Bessa highland, a natural preserve since 1985. With what turns out to be an exiguous amount of that shimmering metal, the Bessa is part of a much larger gold-bearing area dotted with tiny ancient mines. It rises between 300 and 450 metres above sea level, an infinitesimal altitude next to the nearby towering Alps. More than a couple of millennia ago, this was Salassi domain before a Roman contingent led by Consul Appius Claudius Pulcher had the better of them (143–140 BCE) and secured the gold-bearing land for the Roman Empire. Barely a century later the gold-bearing deposits of the region were deemed unworthy of more mining efforts.

To this day, assortments of mainly hobbyists and fortune seekers converge on the Bessa, sifting through sediment, looking for miracles, though of different sorts. It is said that the Victimuli (presumably, in part, the descendants of the Salassi) melted much of the gold to form the statue of a horse, which they interred in the higher portion of the Bessa to conceal it from the Romans. Centuries later, fairies allegedly visited this stretch of once gold-bearing land and promised to share their talent for finding gold. The locals could not have been happier with such a revelation, but during a feast they made the unpardonable error of ridiculing the fairies for their anserine feet. Deeply offended, the fairies left, never to return.

The magical Mars mountain, the quick and lively interlocking montane streams, the glacial refashioning of land yielding concentrations of gold, ancient land struggles, the skilled fairies, the modern breakthrough-seekers and the best means to get that elusive gold. This is the long, rocky, slippery, shining, trap-riddled path of recovering and rebuilding socialism, including anarchism and communism, the precious substance that is within our grasp and made elusive by both malicious and well-meaning forces. Recalling and rediscovering bits of history and legend from one's land of birth can be a salutary method to recover what seems to be lost, but is in reality far from it.

Shorn of petty parochialism and nostalgia, this is itself a challenge of overcoming. It is a process of mixing the grounding in a place – familiar yet, for someone like me, alienated – with the ethereal flight necessary to reach beyond the concreteness of the present and the restraints of the past, including the place of origin, which allows, if all hinges well, for a return to the same place, even if not physically, with renewed vision and reinvigorated determination.

The endeavour implies the opposite of seeking fortunes or collectible relics in a debris of prematurely discarded history. In other words, the sifting process is one of looking for clues for what to do in what we know well or thought we did, and in the revisiting process find out we did not know as well as we thought or appreciate as well as we ought. Whether such renewal makes for any improvement in perspective and political struggle is another matter. The reader must decide that, ultimately.

At least, for what it is worth, it is how I would like to conceive of my political journey thus far and what I want to share with you, though henceforth not in such an allegorical way. One could start such a journey from a much benighted present and work backwards. But working forwards from the past is an essential complement to comprehend the current state of affairs. This is where the importance of various historical socialist experiences becomes evident, especially as they are treated like dirt from both right and left, even as gold cannot exist as such without the dirt that bears it.

It could be that clue seared in the back of my head from the permanent strained look and buried frustrations on the faces of some gimnázium colleagues I saw in the early 1990s while living

Preface

on teachers' wages on Balaton Lake, contrasted by the verdant countryside and plentiful woods I enjoyed, along with their stores of delightful mushrooms and tea herbs.

It must be that heated word slinging over the merits of life under socialism between two villagers at a dusty and bustling village bus stop or that nostalgic twinkle I could discern in some farmers' eyes when talking about the Kádár government, while I was living in south-west Hungary in the late 1990s, and the frenetic pace and copious use of whatever agrochemicals one could find to meet the new watermelon production targets set by some unknown bosses far away in Sweden or Greece.

It must be the expression of political indifference among the Roma I met and the grinding poverty at the margins of rural villages, with their fresh abusive and smelly dumping grounds, and the ride given to a day worker just sacked and stranded tens of kilometres from home and without the money to get there via an ever more expensive and rarefied public transport system, while the financial heist of 2008 raged on, mercilessly hacking to bits the life savings of millions.

It must be that 2010 toxic red mud disaster at Ajka, in Hungary, killing at least seven villagers, rekindling home-town childhood memories of toxic spills contaminating groundwater and sending folks in droves to the shops for bottled water and of anxiety-sparking events not too far away, like the Seveso accident and dioxins terror. Only much later did I learn of the shocking 1963 Vajont Dam disaster, when a massive landslide resulted in nearly 2,000 people drowned or suffocated to death by a sudden rush of muddy water.

But it was the profoundness of the words of a couple of Baré and Jivi (Guahibo) activists in Yaracuy (Venezuela) that added the final displacing weight needed to start unravelling like a load of bog rolls all my prior, sedimented (pre)conceptions of 'Soviet' dictatorship, of authoritarian socialism, of leftist statism. They, too, were critical of Chavismo, and yet they were convinced Chavistas. They recognised and lived the contradictions, but also the necessity to continue along the path taken, seeing also the tangible betterment of the lives of their communities that would not have been possible without the Chávez government. They saw the huge strides being made as well as the setbacks and unsettlingly uncertain future. The former must

always be underlined, and the latter must be faced with the utmost clarity and commensurate vehemence, rather than used to dismiss all the gains made and to foreclose any like path in the future. It is all part of the messy, at times regrettably violent struggle, where taking one's eyes off the ultimate objectives means self-erosion, capitulation and reabsorption into the even more detestable, into an even worse set of conditions. This is what I took from the conversations I was honoured to have with them.

And the Baré and Jivi, as with so many Indigenous communities and peoples struggling for decolonisation, know very well what is at stake, which, unlike for a community like mine, is survival. Up to that point, a full four years after the untimely passing of Hugo Chávez, I had followed the wagon of aloofness, scepticism, critique and refusal of anything combining the state and socialism or communist struggle, a catastrophic oxymoron to me in a previous life and to that of so many others still. Chavismo was just another expression of the wrong-headed kind of socialism that inexorably fails, gets distorted or corrupted, and ends up in some authoritarian Hades. And destroys the environment as well, just look at that greenhouse gas-belching oil economy.

I was not just wrong, I was thoroughly misguided and misdirected, unable to see through the privileges in which I was raised in liberal democracies and the projection of frustration on revolutionaries in the rest of the world of the immense historical defeats and, in some cases, resignation that the left in the imperialist centres had suffered and internalised. I was and to some extent still am among them, the projectors, imbibing that mellifluous labour-aristocracy drink of self-rot while trying to make myself vomit it out for good.

This book is not an exercise in finding the praiseworthy in 'socialist' states, but about reconsidering their environmental impacts according to wider global and ecological contexts, to try to understand what challenges can be expected in the struggle for socialism and what can be done differently for a socialist future. It is a response to the still predominant and facile capitalist and environmentalist rhetoric that would have us equate socialism, and even more so communism, with 'ecocide' and 'totalitarianism'.

Preface

In some respects this work is also an attempt to understand what made state-socialist societies into poor or spent alternatives. In general, it should be household knowledge that the terrible outcomes that came out of state-socialist countries are as justifiable as those that have always typified free-market 'democracies'. All those who favour capitalism or promote capitalist 'democracy' must be tasked with explaining how they can support social systems predicated on historical and current horrors. I suspect this will not happen until the forces sustaining capitalist regimes are defeated and, more desirably, a classless egalitarian order is established.

What is being recommended here, instead of dismissing socialist states as not socialist or as proof that socialism is fatally flawed, is to grasp the reasons for the trajectories socialist states took and to understand the contexts through which those trajectories happened. Without doing so it is not possible to oppose effectively the massive and overwhelming disinformation on socialism (including within parts of the self-described left) and to draw up workable political alternatives and strategies to overcome capitalism (the most ecologically destructive system in the history of humanity), prevent further planetary destruction and embark on building an ecologically sensible society.

The task is not to formulate any blueprints for the future. That, even if legitimate, would require first the end of capitalism in at least most of the world so as to establish globally coordinated popular assemblies deciding on and writing up place-sensitive guidelines. Obviously this is rather far from the currently existing political conditions. Alternatively one can, indeed must, learn from the past regarding what kinds of situations and actions can lead to what kinds of outcomes and legacies so as to do the utmost to prevent or at least minimise the carnage and environmental devastation associated with many of the socialist revolutions that temporarily prevailed and then foundered or were made to founder.

The obverse of this task, not undertaken in this volume, is to demonstrate and underline continuously, insistently and repetitively the horrors of liberal 'democracies' and capitalism generally, since liberal democrats and capitalist encomiasts will not take ownership of or will not feel responsible for the disaster that is their preferred kind

of society and since exactly such demands continue to be made of socialists of any persuasion. In this adverse situation, any concessions to such ideologues must be resisted without falling into any idealisation or rationalisation of past and current socialisms. To accomplish this, the realities of socialism need to be confronted, not ignored or dismissed as an alien other.

Arguing with anti-socialists and especially anti-communists about getting communism right is not too different from arguing with anti-anarchists about desisting from defining anarchism as chaos. It is likely a fruitless effort because political antagonists of egalitarianist movements are usually more interested in maintaining power or in maintaining their privileges (whether explicitly articulated or not), than any logical and evidence-based debate. In such a mindset the point is to debate only insofar as it furthers the conquest of political power, not about convincing or educating anyone or sharing a different perspective on the same problem.

But I would wager that, as in the case of the biophysical and technical sciences (also known as science, technology, engineering, and maths), most simply do not know much, if anything, about socialism, communism or anarchism. Educating, agitating, debating and convincing should be activities of primary importance in that regard. The battle of ideas, if one wishes to make analogies to war, is really waged against self-aware antagonists and not with most people, who might even see arguments of this sort as senseless.

This book is then not an attempt to convince those who already (think they) know, but to share a viewpoint with those who wonder about socialism or who are open to differing interpretations of socialism and its histories. It is certainly not some innocent sharing process on my part. As anyone, I have a set of principles and a related (or consequent) political proclivity, which is here identified as an anarchist-communist and (eco)feminist variant of ecosocialism, which may not always be evident in the ways I express myself in what follows.

Acknowledgements

Just conceiving of this book took a couple of years. Its precursor is a 2016 editorial appearing in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, ‘The Enduring Relevance of State-Socialism’. The further development of that editorial into a larger project would not have been possible without the solicitation and editing care of Associate Commissioning Editor Jakob Horstmann. Along the way, the work benefited greatly from the critical eyes of Deborah Engel-Di Mauro, which was especially important to what became Chapter 2 of this book, and of Marco Armiero, Leigh Brownhill, Maarten DeKadt, Danny Faber, Mazen Labban, George Martin, Laura Pulido, Jose Tapia and Judith Watson, who all contributed in different ways to the making of that 2016 editorial and what came of it afterwards. Robert Webb’s and David Castle’s supervision and Dan Harding’s copy-editing at Pluto Press have greatly facilitated this work’s completion. I cannot thank all of them enough for their generosity.

The ideas expressed in this book also poured out of many everyday experiences that wreaked not a few moments of cognitive dissonance in me since the early 1990s, in hindsight a most intellectually stultifying period. Accompanying those moments were occasional conversations and debates that are not easy to have even now, owing to widespread anti-communism. The early 2000s, in contrast, became a nursery for my inchoate, then largely inimical thoughts on socialist states. The fertile turnabout was mainly traceable to the good fortune of becoming part of the now long-defunct New York Editorial Group of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, in the delightful and enlightening company of the above-thanked Maarten DeKadt, George Martin and Jose Tapia, alongside Paul Bartlett, Paul Cooney, Eliza Darling, Peter Freund, Joel Kovel, Patty Lee Parmalee, Costas Panayotakis and Eddie Yuen. It was during that time that my ideas on state socialism started to turn.

Very gradually those ideas shifted in an unexpected direction. It is a direction that is not necessarily aligned with the thoughts of most, if not all, of those who were part of that New York Editorial Group, and certainly not with mine as they were then. But I still owe all those comrades a profuse thanks for providing the spark, which, under institutional pressures and redirections due to my varied interests, was temporarily extinguished but reignited about a decade later, when I could return to studying the histories of socialism. Eventually, what I managed to publish on the subject intertwined with my background in physical geography and research on soils. The work now before you is to some degree a scion of that interscientific graft, nourished by those who have stimulated me in one way or another, including the Jivi and Baré comrades mentioned in the Preface, to persist in reconsidering and rethinking socialist states in what I hope will be deemed a constructive direction.