



November 2023

## Institute for Social Ecology: Reclaiming Utopianism

Contribution to GTI Forum [Experiments in Movement Unity](#)

Brian Tokar

Since its founding nearly fifty years ago in 1974, the [Institute for Social Ecology](#) has been an international educational and activist organization operating in collaboration with, and in direct service to, a wide array of social movements. The Institute has worked to advance the political and philosophical outlook first developed by our co-founder Murray Bookchin and colleagues beginning in the 1960s, and to provide a hub for successive generations of movement activists to deepen their theoretical understanding, strengthen inter- and intra-movement networks, and develop practical skills ranging from community organizing to permaculture and green urban design.

Social ecology has long argued for the fundamental inseparability of ecological and social problems and solutions, and was among the earliest outlooks to identify the growth imperative of capitalism as the systemic underlying basis of today's widespread threats to the integrity of living ecosystems and human communities alike. Social ecology examines how the myth of human domination of nature emerged from rising relationships of domination among people following the breakdown of ancient tribal societies, particularly in Europe and the Middle East. Its philosophical inquiry examines the emergence of human consciousness from within the processes of natural evolution, exploring how evolutionary processes may have seeded the origins of human creativity and freedom. Seeking a political outlook that is most consistent with those human attributes, social ecologists advocate for a communalist politics that is rooted in horizontalism, direct democracy, and confederal relationships between liberated cities, towns, and neighborhoods. ISE co-founder Dan Chodorkoff has striven to reclaim the utopian tradition in Western thought and argues for a "practical utopianism" embracing advanced principles from

green building and urban redesign, together with eco-technologies to produce food, energy, and other necessities.<sup>1</sup>

With these principles in mind, the Institute has brought together activists from the antinuclear and alternative technology movements of the 1970s/80s, leading thinkers and writers on ecofeminism, proponents of the community-centered, grassroots dimensions of early Green politics, key organizers from the global justice/alterglobalization movement of the 1990s/early 2000s, and some of the most committed participants in Occupy Wall Street as well as its various US and international offshoots. The ISE has worked in close partnership with Puerto Rican urban homesteaders in New York City, Indigenous activists and thinkers from the Akwesasne Mohawk community and elsewhere, local democracy advocates from Greece and the Scandinavian countries, Kurdish exiles from the Middle East and, most recently, activists from the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center in Detroit.<sup>2</sup>

We worked with people from across New England to bring the issue of GMO contamination of our foods and agricultural crops to our local Town Meetings—one of the longest-thriving institutions of direct democracy in the world today—and allied with international advocates from around the world to challenge the huge international conventions of the North American biotechnology lobby throughout the decade of the 2000s. We have participated in international actions and forums to highlight the outlook of climate justice for more than fifteen years, and have also featured the accomplishments of Kurdish activists, who have been developing their own theory of democratic confederalism in liberated zones inside war-torn northern Syria. Several recent efforts have focused on reinforcing our long-standing commitment to global environmental and racial justice.<sup>3</sup>

Just prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, young social ecologists and allies from across the US, Canada, and Mexico convened the first North American Congress of Municipal Movements in the city of Detroit, which served as the founding convention of an ongoing federation of grassroots organizations known as [Symbiosis](#). And since the spread of the pandemic, cohorts from activist collectives in the Philippines, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, and many other places have participated in our online classes, significantly enhancing the Institute's international character. As our fiftieth anniversary approaches, we are confident as ever that social ecology will continue to inform and inspire social movements from around the world for decades to come.

## Endnotes

1. Dan Chokordoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2014)
2. Eirik Eiglad, ed., *Social Ecology and Social Change* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2015)
3. A variety of perspectives on social ecology and anti-racism are profiled in the Winter 2022–23 issue of our journal *Harbinger*, at <https://harbinger-journal.com/>. For video footage from our Summer 2022 event in collaboration with Cooperation Jackson and others, see <https://social-ecology.org/wp/2022/09/summer-gathering-videos/>.

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## About the Author



Brian Tokar is an activist and author, a lecturer in Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont, and board member of 350 Vermont and the Institute for Social Ecology. He is the author of *The Green Alternative*, *Earth for Sale*, and *Toward Climate Justice: Perspectives on the Climate Crisis and Social Change*. He is also the co-editor of *Agriculture and Food in Crisis, Redesigning Life?*, *Gene Traders*, and *Climate Justice and Community Renewal: Resistance and Grassroots Solutions*. He holds an MA in biophysics from Harvard University.

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## About the Publication

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## About the Great Transition Initiative

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