

PREFACE

Any interest in studying biophysical process meets mostly with disinterest among leftists. Yet some of the major figures in leftist movements have been, for example, physical geographers (e.g., Élisée Reclus, Pyotr Kropotkin), physicists and/or mathematicians (e.g., Sofia Kovalevskaya, Cheikh Anta Diop), agronomists (e.g., Amílcar Cabral), paleontologists (e.g., Stephen Jay Gould), and physicians (e.g., Ernesto Che Guavara). At the same time, the biophysical sciences are rife with politics, the kind of politics that does not get acknowledged as politics and even somehow passes for objectivity. The biophysical sciences tend to be the sort of capitalism-friendly, classist, patriarchal, Eurocentric, racialized milieu that arguably makes many leftists want to leave or puts them off for good. Or at least it makes it understandable why so few leftists are attracted by biophysical science work. But, in spite of it all, there do exist biophysical scientists who are sympathetic if not leftist themselves. In fact it is, thanks to the likes of Ken Hewitt, David Schwartzman, Richard Levins, Judith Carney, Susannah Hecht, Michael Stocking, Fred Magdoff, Miguel Altieri, and Richard Lewontin that I have found inspiration to persist in the study of soils. It is a veritable shame that their role, contributions, and potential are so under-appreciated within the left.

The current situation is a most dismal one, one that undermines future possibilities for an egalitarian alternative to prevail. A revolution simply cannot be built by focusing only on organizing people, devising novel social theories, or studying what happens in society, although all such activity is fundamentally necessary. One cannot count on technocrats or scientists bound to liberal democratic outlooks for help in making a new society happen, especially when there is little to no awareness among most biophysical scientists about capitalist processes and certainly even less appreciation for the highly destructive nature of a capitalist mode of production. The biophysical sciences are instead replete with ready-made facile explanations for social horrors and environmental harms and with recipes to alleviate or resolve them that are aimed at finding all the culprits in the world except the ones with the most influence.

So it is out of long-standing enchantment and disappointment with the biophysical sciences and the left that this book has come about. It has taken a long time to figure out how to combine a fascination with soils with a commitment to struggles for egalitarianism. The process continues to be arduous, constantly threatened by reductionistic traps, and the hope is that the reader will approach the book in that light. It can also be overwhelming to attempt to keep up with social theory, critical empirical work on social processes, theories on biophysical dynamics, and the vast empirical work on soils. There are certainly few incentives to do so, institutionally and in any of the various strands of the left. But it seems that without an adequate grasp of a biophysical science, and the practical skills it can enable, any talk of revolution becomes rather vacuous. Biophysical scientists have proven historically to be largely subservient to the ruling regime of the day (and sometimes emphatically aligned with the ruling classes). It must become for the left a priority to develop supportive frameworks designed to cultivate interest and impart skills in the biophysical sciences. These could take the form of informal institutions, independently established and managed grassroots infrastructure such as soil and water analysis labs, and research agendas that explicitly meld political commitment with biophysical scientific work without collapsing one into the other. Even having time dedicated within leftist organizations to discuss the issue, to educate one another in one or another biophysical science, and to share and develop such knowledge and skills could help further the process of unifying the sciences, liberating them from the capitalist grip, and channel them toward much more socially sensitized and responsible ends. If this book contributes even to a very minor degree toward achieving such objectives, it will have been worthwhile writing it.

Saed

Neu Pfalz, in the Land of the Sepus