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Review: Riding the Wind by Peter Marshall

Aragorn!

Fall/Winter 2007

Riding the Wind — A New Philosophy for a New
Era

by Peter Marshall

Continuum New York, 2000

262 pages. paper. \$35.95

Peter Marshall presents this as a book of philosophy, but is actually a jargon-free restatement of social ecology for a non-political (in the anarchist sense of the term) audience. As such, it stands as a clear explanation of the motivations and aspirations for such a society and a decent introduction for someone who is already attracted to green and left-of-liberal ideas. It promotes a vision of a society that is very different than this one. In addition, Marshall's ideas should provoke discussions about sustainability, kindness, and social change from a different orientation than more *radical* (in the sense of riot porn and dumpster diving) texts and publications.

Marshall is primarily known in anarchist circles as the author of the excellent introduction to the broadly understood

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anarchist tradition in *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. Peter has been involved with the Freedom Press circle for 20 odd years and is a fellow at the Royal Geographical Society (of which Kropotkin was also a member). Peter had a moment of broader fame due to a six-part PBS documentary series on his circumnavigation of Africa by sail. He is a prolific author and sailor and has written about alchemy, megaliths, astrology, William Godwin, the history of ecology, William Blake, Cuba, and sailing around Africa and the Aegean Sea.

But what is social ecology? Long time readers of this magazine would be hard pressed to forget social ecology as interpreted through the myopic rantings of Murray Bookchin. Marshall steers clear of any whiff of those. Marshall's social ecology, which he calls "liberation ecology," breaks most clearly with Bookchin in his lack of emphasis on capitalist social relationships being to blame for humans' horrific relationship with the planet they live on.

The most important and urgent task is to develop a new relationship with nature, or rather reinvent the archaic one we have lost. We do not stand apart as subject and object: humans are as natural as wolves, oaks and rocks. Nature is the air we breathe, the land we tread, the body we move. But as a species with tremendous power through our science and technology, we have a responsibility to use the power well, a responsibility for ourselves and the rest of nature that is our only dwelling. [95]

Marshall points less to first causes and more to solutions. Most of his solutions are so innocuous and gentle as to barely bear repeating. Being so agreeable and pleasant, Marshall achieves a kind of anti-Bookchin aura which, for all the other criticisms you can make of Bookchin, ends up being somewhat forgettable.

Take his use (or rather overuse) of sailing metaphors. Naturally sailing is something Marshall enjoys, and it seems like a wonderful way to pass the time, but one's own hobbies are rarely as interesting to other people as they are to oneself. And as a metaphor space that fills this book we are tested by phrases like "riding the wind," "stretching wings," and "waters of lucidity" to walk away from the book entirely. Couple this with a certain inclination to use soft terms to describe hard things like and the problems with trying to write to a general audience become apparent.

It is not too late. There is nothing to prevent us from developing a new philosophy for a new era. We can create a new society in harmony with each other and the earth. We can, above all, learn how to ride the wind of the new millennium and to sail well together on the vast ocean of being — exhilarated, joyful and free! [262]

The book is at least five, possibly ten, chapters too long. Once the line was established that living gently on the earth and respecting life is the goal of a liberation ecology it was entirely unnecessary to devote entire chapters to: vegetarianism, free love, technological excess, children, etc, etc. We get it: we should live softly, compassionately, and ride the wind.

While not probed very deeply the question remains as to why this book is subtitled "A New Philosophy for a New Era." The concept that discussing ideas should not only be the rubric of specialists in ivory towers is a sympathetic one but isn't actually presented in this book. The ideas themselves aren't particularly new, although the conscious injection of Kropotkin's thoughts on Mutual Aid and anarchist notions of solidarity and free love are new complementary ingredients to this brew. Philosophy is evoked as the project we are taking part in by reading the book, but by little else. What Marshall calls philosophy

reads more like a personal manifesto complete with the individual quirks, history, and inclinations of the author. From a less talented author this would be called a rant.