

An Essay on Total Liberation

Marcusean Insights for Catalyzing Transformation

Dan Fischer

2024

Contents

A Place of Eros	5
Catalyzing Many Creations	7
Refuse to Make the Stuff	8
Technology of Liberation	11
Total Liberation from Compulsory Work	13

A 2021 study found that 56% of young people across ten countries believed “humanity is doomed.” The researchers rightly warned against narratives of “individualizing ‘the problem’ of climate anxiety, with suggestions that the best response is for the individual to ‘take action.’” However, they followed with the equally misguided suggestion that “such action needs to be particularly taken by those in power.”¹ Those of us influenced by Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse’s analysis consider it unwise to rely on “those in power.” The world capitalist system’s so-called solutions—from nuclear power and geo-engineering to “regenerative ranching” and even industrial-scale renewables—not only fail to resolve the climate crisis but bring their own comparable existential threats to humanity, animals and the planet.²

Animal liberation campaigners have all the more reason to feel hopelessness, given the overwhelming human supremacism pervading global civilization. This is especially true in affluent countries such as the United States where only 6% of humans are vegetarian (compared to 14% worldwide) and where per-capita meat consumption is about three times the global average. As Hailey Huget counsels in this volume, “you may feel as though there is no way out.” Josh Harper, formerly of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty has elaborated on the overwhelming sense of despair experienced by animal liberationists:

I mean, you reach this point when you’re an animal rights activist where you are such a statistically insignificant part of the population. You know, where everywhere you go, people are wrapped in the skins of creatures that you consider your equals. And you walk in the store, and it’s a fucking atrocity exhibit everywhere you turn. You reach this point where you feel like no one cares. You know? No one cares ... because there has never been a human holocaust in history that can compare to the number of animal lives taken in one year. I mean, there’s nothing. I mean, we kill more animals every year—every single year—than humans have ever walked on this planet. If you were to chain up and kill every person who ever lived—every human who ever lived!—you would not equal the number of animals killed for food. In one, single, year.³

Today’s situation resembles the bleak scenario Marcuse confronted in 1964’s *One-Dimensional Man*, where he argued that industrialized society’s masses have been so bought-off and brain-washed that their thought had become entirely “one-dimensional,” or uncritical. “The critical theory of society,” Marcuse dismally concluded, “possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains nega-

¹ Elizabeth Marks, Caroline Hickman, Panu Petteri Pihkala, Susan Clayton, Eric Lewandowski, Elouise E. Mayall, Britt Wray, Catriona Mellor, and Lise Van Susteren, “Young People’s Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon,” Social Science Research Network, September 7, 2021.

² Hoodwinked in the Hothouse: Resist False Solutions to Climate Change, 3rd ed, eds. Lucia Amorelli, Dylan Gibson, and Tamra Gilbertson (California: Community Printers, 2021). “Grazed and Confused? New Report Evaluates the Climate Impact of Grazing Livestock,” University of Oxford, October 3, 2017, <https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-news-grazed-and-confused>.

³ Hailey Huget, “Abolish the Meat Industry: A Roadmap for Transforming Animal Liberation from a Single-Issue Cause into a Mass Movement.” In Zane McNeill (ed.), *Building Multispecies Resistance Against Exploitation: Stories from the Frontlines of Labor and Animal Rights*. Peter Lang, 2024. David Naguib Pellow, *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Radical Earth Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), ch. 2.

tive.”⁴ Marxist-humanist Raya Dunayevskaya aptly criticized Marcuse for analyzing only official labor leadership and ignoring the “powerful oppositional voice” at the rank-and-file level.⁵ Going further, fellow critical theorist Erich Fromm described Marcuse’s view as non-revolutionary, since “revolution was never based on hopelessness, nor can it ever be.”⁶

Fortunately, an explosion of anti-racist and anti-colonial uprisings, sweeping from the Global South to the North at the time of *One-Dimensional Man*’s publication, sent Marcuse in a far more hopeful trajectory. Had *One-Dimensional Man* focused more on the world’s unindustrialized areas, Marcuse might have already encountered greater possibilities for resistance, represented for example by Algeria’s struggle against French colonialism.

Writing from Algeria, Martinique psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon in 1961 theorized a “total liberation” that, encompassing social and psychological decolonization, “involves every facet of the personality.”⁷ When *One-Dimensional Man* was published, protests against white supremacy and the Vietnam War swept the United States where Marcuse lived. By 1968, many such liberatory struggles comprised a “worldwide eruption of new social movements.”⁸

In 1969’s *An Essay on Liberation*, which had the working title “Beyond One-Dimensional Man,”⁹ Marcuse described these movements as a “Great Refusal” of domination and correctly predicted their lasting impact.¹⁰ According to Black feminist scholar Angela Davis, his former student, Marcuse welcomed the 1960s movements as “much needed fresh air when the world was suffocating.”¹¹ These struggles gave space to emerging anti-speciesist concerns, such as when French youths in May 1968 demanded the liberation of zoo animals.¹² During the subsequent decade, vegetarian lifestyles and philosophies spread substantially, and the formation of groups such as the United Kingdom’s Animal Liberation Front and the United States’ MOVE, spread militant tactics in order to sabotage animal exploitation.¹³

Pessimistic accounts of the possibility for transformation continue to be undermined by the eruption of uprisings in our times. Soon after social scientists declared an “end of history” in the 1990s, the Zapatistas launched a global justice movement shattering the neoliberal consensus. Just as the 2011 anarcho-nihilist pamphlet *Desert* announced the impossibility of world revolution, the Arab Spring and Occupy movements emerged. In April 2020, Frank B Wilderson III’s acclaimed *Afropessimism* announced a ghastly choice between white supremacy and apoca-

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964). Retrieved from Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/herbert/pubs/64onedim/odmcontents.html>.

⁵ Raya Dunayevskaya, “Reason and Revolution vs Conformity and Technology,” *The Activist*, 1964. Retrieved from Wisconsin Historical Society, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/4237>.

⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 8–9.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 233.

⁸ George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1987), 1.

⁹ Douglas Kellner, “Introduction: Radical Politics, Marcuse, and the New Left,” in *Herbert Marcuse: The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2005), 22.

¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (London: Penguin, 1969). Retrieved from Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/1969/essay-liberation.htm>.

¹¹ Angela Davis, “Angela Davis on Protest, 1968, and Her Old Teacher, Herbert Marcuse,” LitHub, April 3, 2019, <https://lithub.com/angela-davis-on-protest-1968-and-her-old-teacher-herbert-marcuse/>.

¹² Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left*, 102.

¹³ Pellow, *Total Liberation*, ch. 1. Pellow notes that “Many MOVE members were vegetarians and staunch animal rights activists” and quotes the organization: “we will take immediate action to stop anyone from beating a dog, throwing stones at birds, or causing similar impositions on innocent life.”

lypse.¹⁴ One month later, Black youths and their accomplices launched the United States' largest uprisings in decades and helped bring the idea of police abolition into the mainstream. Marcuse's trajectory demonstrates that even as we recognize the possibility of annihilation and the urgency it brings, we can transcend despair by organizing toward revolutionary alternatives.

A Place of Eros

The countercultural consciousness of the 1960s signified a resurgence of what Freud had labeled Eros—the life instinct—against a death-desiring society. As Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* explained, young radicals eschewed ubiquitously-advertised “false needs” and instead sought truly “vital needs” including “the abolition of injustice and misery” and “to be freed from the administered comforts and the destructive productivity of the exploitative society, freed from smooth heteronomy.” He envisioned “a society in which the abolition of poverty and toil terminates in a universe where the sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful become forms of existence.” There would be an “aesthetic rather than repressive environment” with “parks and gardens rather than highways and parking lots.” Even productive activities would become as playful and creative as painting or poetry. Our entire lives would resemble “the imagination, the beautiful, the dream.”

Recognizing that a post-capitalist society could provide to each according to their true needs at a level “considerably lower than that of advanced capitalist productivity which is geared toward obscene affluence and waste”, Marcuse declared that “utopia” itself was possible. It no longer referred to “that which has ‘no place’” (the literal meaning in ancient Greek) but rather to “that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies.” If such claims of abundance were already true in 1969, they have become even more true over the subsequent decades of increasing productivity along with an unconscionable wealth gap.

Accordingly, today's global movements often complement their necessary demands for reparations and demilitarization with radically anti-consumerist understandings of a good life. As documented in the 2019 collection *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, these ideas converge with concepts around the world including *buen vivir* (living well) across Latin America, *ubuntu* (humanness) in southern Africa and *swaraj* (self-rule) in South Asia.¹⁵ Spearheaded by the world's poorer, Indigenous, Black and brown communities, along with some more privileged sectors challenging alienation, these struggles resist the capitalist imperative for endless economic growth. Instead they call for economic degrowth at the global level, especially in the Global North, and for alternatives to conventional development in the South.

Although these movements envision an end to consumerist society, they propose replacing it with what philosopher Kate Soper calls an “alternative hedonism” that finds meaning and happiness in stronger communities and more varied experiences. Their goal isn't private wealth but rather public affluence in the form of parks, libraries, cafeterias, free stores, gardens, theaters,

¹⁴ See the following critiques of these pessimistic notions and texts. Mike Leach, “Chiapas: The End of ‘the end of history’”, *Green Left*, October 3, 1995. <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/chiapas-end-end-history>. Huey Hewitt, “To Save the World,” *Spectre Journal*, July 26, 2021, <https://spectrejournal.com/to-save-the-world/>. John Warwick, “Desert: A Review Essay,” *Organise!*, October 9, 2019, retrieved from The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/john-warwick-desert-a-review-essay>.

¹⁵ *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary*, eds. Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019).

free schools, museums, arcades, and makerspaces. Soper elaborates that alternative hedonism “might be enjoyed by both human and nonhuman animals” as delicious vegan food frees up land and ocean for wild critters to repopulate, and as sanctuaries provide a far better life for creatures rescued from animal experimentation and factory farms.¹⁶

By challenging anthropocentrism, such struggles echo Angela Davis’s observation that “there is a connection between [...] the way we treat animals and the way we treat people who are at the bottom of the hierarchy.”¹⁷ This solidarity with nonhuman beings finds expression in 2010’s historic Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, adopted by 35,000 grassroots campaigners gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and by masses of people adopting vegetarian and vegan lifestyles, most widely in the Global South and in the North’s communities of color.¹⁸

If such a radically ecological vision could shatter the hegemonic, “one-dimensional” world-view, then it would help address many of the typical objections to utopian, anarchistic visions. Answering “what’s the incentive to work?” is not so daunting when a decrease in production enables a far shorter workweek of perhaps only ten hours of self-managed productive labor, plus a fair share of housework and caregiving. Marcuse’s suggestion that we can rely on workers’ intrinsic motivation, and “make the process of production a process of creation,”¹⁹ does not seem so far-fetched if we only need to transform a small portion of today’s workweek. The critical theorist wrote in 1969 that “the vast majority of the population” currently works in “unnecessary jobs” geared toward waste, repression, and manufactured needs. In 2018, anthropologist David Graeber confirmed with survey data that only twelve hours of industrialized countries’ workweek are really productive.²⁰ An even shorter workweek, therefore, would be sufficient in an economy based on production for actual needs. With abundant free time, housework and elder care could be distributed more evenly across genders.

Answering “what about crime?” can be answered with reference to the stronger communities and wealth sharing enabled by global degrowth. Aside from disbanding the world’s most violent institutions, particularly states and corporations, such a shift would help eliminate the massive inequalities, deprivation, and hyper-alienation that lead individuals to harm each other. Angela Davis and fellow Black liberationist Mumia Abu-Jamal point to Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Diné (Navajo) methods of community-based peacemaking and nonviolent sanctions facilitating repair and rehabilitation.²¹ While such methods might have limited application in a sprawling society of strangers, they would be more practicable in a decentralized world based on Eros.

¹⁶ Kate Soper, *Post-growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020), 135.

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, “Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society,” *Capitalism and Nature* 3, no. 3 (September 1992): 33. Sista Vegan, “Angela Davis on Eating Chickens, Occupy, and Including Animals in Social Justice Initiative of the 99%,” uploaded on February 24, 2012. Vimeo video, 3:37, <https://vimeo.com/37361383>.

¹⁸ Laura Schleifer and Dan Fischer, “Animal Liberation from Below,” *New Politics* Winter 2022 (*New Politics* Vol. XVIII No. 4, Whole Number 72).

¹⁹ Marcuse, “An Essay on Liberation.”

²⁰ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

²¹ Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Y. Davis, “Alternatives to the Present System of Capitalist Injustice,” *Feminist Wire*, January 20, 2014, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/01/alternatives-to-the-present-system-of-capitalist-injustice/>.

Catalyzing Many Creations

Around the turn of the 21st century, Mexican philosopher Gustavo Esteva summarized the emerging consensus of emancipatory struggles as “One no, and many yeses.”²² The “one no,” a rejection of domination, paralleled the “Great Refusal” which Marcuse described:

[N]o matter how great the distance between the middle-class revolt in the metropolises and the life-and-death struggle of the wretched of the earth—common to them is the depth of the Refusal. It makes them reject the rules of the game that is rigged against them, the ancient strategy of patience and persuasion, the reliance on the Good Will in the Establishment, its false and immoral comforts, its cruel affluence.

The “many yeses” referred to the creations of diverse horizontally-structured alternatives which form coalitions from below. In 1972’s *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Marcuse advised militants to create “counterinstitutions,” “popular assemblies,” and councils “in the factories, offices, neighborhoods,” as well as liberatory schools and imaginative art.²³

Marcuse argued that small groups of people can become powerful “catalysts of transformation,” affecting social change well beyond their local communities.²⁴ In the terminology of Marcuse’s student George Katsiaficas, the 1960s movements sparked an “eros effect,” meaning a “liberation of the life instincts” which enabled revolutionary sensibilities to spread worldwide.²⁵ Katsiaficas described the profound impact that such moments could have on multitudes of participants:

Though secular, such moments metaphorically resemble the religious transformation of the individual soul through the sacred baptism in the ocean of universal life and love. The integration of the sacred and the secular in such moments of ‘political eros’ (a term used by Herbert Marcuse) is an indication of the true potentiality of the human species.²⁶

An especially inspiring potential catalyst today are Indigenous movements for land defense and cultural resurgence. Even in the face of settler-colonial genocide, Indigenous peoples have often delayed polluting infrastructure while protecting the world’s most intact landscapes.²⁷ With millennia of experience in stateless living, Indigenous societies have also been at the forefront of preserving what Marcuse terms the “anarchic element” of struggle.²⁸ It’s no surprise, therefore, that their communities have played a key role in the alternative-creating movements of recent years.

²² Paul Kingsnorth, *One No, Many Yeses: A Journey to the Heart of the Global Resistance Movement* (London: Free Press, 2003).

²³ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

²⁴ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*.

²⁵ Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left*, 7, 10.

²⁶ Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left*, 6.

²⁷ Dallas Goldtooth, Saldamando, Alberto, and Kyle Gracey, “Indigenous Resistance Against Carbon,” Indigenous Environmental Network and Oil Change International, August 2021, <https://www.ienearth.org/indigenous-resistance-against-carbon/>. Julia E Fa et al., “Importance of Indigenous Peoples’ Lands for the Conservation of Intact Forest Landscapes,” *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (2020): 135–140.

²⁸ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*.

The “many yeses” can also be seen in Sri Lanka’s Sarvodaya villages, Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement, South Africa’s Abahlali baseMjondolo, Syria’s Local Councils and Democratic Confederals, North America’s Zapatista, Cherán and Cooperation Jackson communes, and many like-minded projects worldwide affiliated with the Global Ecovillage, Transition Town, Right to the City and Symbiosis networks. Consistent with animal-liberationist goals, “Most ecovillages favour vegetarian, vegan, and organic cooking.”²⁹

By many accounts, participation in these movements offer a form of psychic liberation, cultivating what Marcuse called an “anti-repressive sensibility, allergic to domination.”³⁰ By offering universal basic services that are unlikely to come from states, the mutual aid at the heart of such projects can be especially important as a means of survival during periods of unemployment and strike action. Moreover, as Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, a former Black Panther explains, mutual aid programs “inspire confidence in the revolutionary forces and expose the government as uncaring and incompetent.”³¹

The liberatory experiments can also offer important means for community self-defense. Marcuse—in his 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance”—advocated for militant intolerance of oppression, for the sake of “protecting [hu]man[ity] and animals from cruelty and aggression.”³² Toward these ends, Indigenous land defenders, Black Lives Matter protesters, anti-fascists, and the Animal and Earth Liberation Fronts engage in monkeywrenching, tire slashings, home demonstrations, arsons, and occasional physical confrontation. While following the alter-globalization movement’s bedrock “respect for life,”³³ liberatory struggles commit to unwavering solidarity with peoples and anti-authoritarians defending the Earth’s beings, cultures, land, water and air.

Refuse to Make the Stuff

While Marcuse emphasized the importance of participants well outside of the industrial proletariat, he maintained that “the working class is still the historical agent of revolution,” thereby asserting an ongoing importance of struggle at the point of production and reproduction. Workplace organizing is all the more important given the ecological imperative to decrease and repurpose productive work. As the Industrial Workers of the World and Earth First! organizer Judi Bari emphasized, “It is only when the factory workers refuse to make the stuff, it is only when the loggers refuse to cut the ancient trees, that we can ever hope for real and lasting change.”³⁴

Uniting northern California’s loggers and Earth First!ers against corporate deforestation, Bari’s organizing became a central inspiration for the theory of green syndicalism, or horizontalist green unionizing. Seizing workplaces and establishing cooperatives, communities could

²⁹ Robert Hall, “The Ecovillage Experience, as an Evidence Base for National Wellbeing Strategies,” *Intellectual Economics* 9 (2015): 37.

³⁰ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*.

³¹ Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

³² Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 1965, retrieved from <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/publications/1960s/1965-repressive-tolerance-fulltext.html>.

³³ Laurence Cox and Lesley Wood, “An Oral History of Peoples’ Global Action,” *Interface* 9, no. 1 (2017): 357–358.

³⁴ Judi Bari, “Revolutionary Ecology,” 1997, retrieved from <http://www.judibari.org/revolutionary-ecology.html>.

decentrally coordinate with each other to contract and converge regional and global wealth, share sustainable technologies and dismantle oppression.

Green syndicalists build on green-unionizing efforts by Trade Unions for Energy Democracy and La Via Campesina. Trade Unions for Energy Democracy aligns trade union bodies on six continents in support of “a just transition to democratically accountable renewable energy systems.”³⁵

Meanwhile, La Via Campesina, a network of tens of millions of small farmers in 88 countries, adopts a basically green-syndicalist approach of horizontal federation and direct action for local food sovereignty and climate justice. Based on La Via Campesina’s belief that “we urgently need to reduce meat consumption,”³⁶ and the mainstream scientific view that “grass-fed livestock are not a climate solution,”³⁷ peasant movements can ally with animal liberationists to resist large ranchers and factory farms, and to make plant-based diets and livelihoods more accessible to rural communities.

By organizing with fossil fuel and slaughterhouse workers, green syndicalists can help repurpose their workplaces toward restoring ecosystems, running animal sanctuaries and producing small-scale renewables. If hyper-exploited³⁸ slaughterhouse workers went on strike with such demands, supported by solidarity funds, these workers would raise global consciousness and directly impede the entire meat industry. Slaughterhouses form a bottleneck in Brazil, the world’s top killer of cows, and in the United States, the world’s top killer of chickens. As the world briefly saw in the spring and summer of 2020, slaughterhouse shutdowns can keep supermarket shelves empty of meat. Moreover, as Huget notes in this volume, “a small handful of companies” produce “almost all of the meat products in the United States,” providing a strategic focus for point-of-production organizing in the country with the world’s highest per-capita meat consumption.³⁹

Another focus for green organizers might be supporting employees of animal-rights and environmental nonprofits. Radicals rightly criticize these nonprofits for their reformist organization, but the employees themselves often tend to prefer bolder stances and actions.⁴⁰ A number of radicals and vegans get day jobs at such nonprofits, and the EF! network famously began when disgruntled Big Green employees quit in order to pursue a “no compromise” approach. Workers within these organizations continue to press for positive changes. For example, the Audubon Society workers’ union is pushing for their employer to change its historic name, since Audubon was a slaveowner.⁴¹ Former and current employees of the Animal Legal Defense Fund have been urging changes that would make their workplace more equitable and more effective at protecting animals.⁴²

³⁵ Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, “Why It’s Important for Unions to Support TUED,” retrieved March 11, 2023, <https://www.tuedglobal.org/why-its-important-for-unions-to-support-tued>.

³⁶ La Via Campesina, “La Via Campesina in Action for Climate Justice,” 2019, https://www.agroecology-europe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/La-Via-Campesina-in-Action-for-Climate-Justice_volume_44_6_1.pdf

³⁷ “Grazed and confused?” University of Oxford.

³⁸ See Marek Muller’s “Violence Begets Violence” in the present volume.

³⁹ Huget, “Abolish the Meat Industry.”

⁴⁰ Pellow, *Total Liberation*, ch. 1.

⁴¹ “Audubon Leadership Doubles Down on Racist Name,” *The Bird Union*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.birdunion.org/posts/NAS-keeps-racist-name-statement/>.

⁴² Alexandra Martinez, “Former Animal Legal Defense Fund Staffers Accuse Organization of Transphobia, Union-busting, and More,” *Prism*, June 26, 2023, <https://prismreports.org/2023/06/26/animal-legal-defense-fund-toxic-workplace/>.

In contrast to orthodox Marxist approaches, a green syndicalism would also recognize the role of houseworkers, peasants, and students as workers who reproduce the economy. Understanding students as apprentices for their future jobs, we can view the worldwide student climate strikes as significant economic disruptions. Young organizers such as Vanessa Nakate in Uganda and Ta’Kaiya Blaney in Canada have radicalized youths by explicitly rejecting capitalism and colonialism. If the right’s fear and global union support are any indication, students’ climate strikes could catalyze much broader unrest.⁴³

Going further, a truly anti-anthropocentric or “deep-green”⁴⁴ syndicalism would recognize that many animals, too, belong to an expanded notion of the working class. In her chapter in this anthology, Catherine Oliver gives the example of chickens as laborers:

Obviously, the chickens’ labor extracted by humans is (at least) twofold: to grow big and fleshy for meat, a form of metabolic labor (Beldo, 2017), or to produce eggs at a rapid rate, a kind of reproductive or byproductive labor (Oliver, 2021).

Given what Davis calls “the horrendous conditions under which chickens are industrially bred,” it’s no surprise that chickens frequently engage in resistant behavior and have even escaped from farms and slaughterhouse-bound trucks.⁴⁵

In fact, many animals worldwide resist domination and destruction. Poland’s wild bison sheltered a runaway cow, and Rwanda’s gorillas have cooperate to dismantle poachers’ traps.⁴⁶ An Australian parrot has removed anti-nesting spikes from windowsills, and South African elephants have released captive antelope.⁴⁷ A runaway goat in New Jersey has returned to rescue 75 other goats and sheep from an auction house.⁴⁸ Dogs in Greece and Chile have participated in anti-austerity riots.⁴⁹ Whales have warned each other about whaling ships.⁵⁰ Since 2020, orcas have been attacking yachts in the strait of Gibraltar, a behavior that some scientists attribute to (industrial and upper-class) humans’ attacks and invasions.⁵¹ Forests have stubbornly regener-

⁴³ Matthew Taylor, “Trade Unions around the World Support Global Climate Strike,” *The Guardian*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/19/trade-unions-around-the-world-support-global-climate-strike>.

⁴⁴ Val Plumwood describes “the critique of anthropocentrism or ‘deep green theory’” in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 198. By using this term, I hope to avoid ceding it to the much newer network called Deep Green Resistance which has spread transphobic and authoritarian ideas.

⁴⁵ “Real-life ‘Chicken Run’ for Stowaway Hen Using Lorry,” *BBC*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-esssex-44511686>.

⁴⁶ Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 69. Eben Diskin, “Young Gorillas Are Working Together to Destroy Poachers’ Traps in Rwanda,” *Matador Network*, June 5, 2018, <https://matadornetwork.com/read/young-gorillas-working-together-destroy-poachers-traps-rwanda/>.

⁴⁷ Josh Taylor, “Chick Flick: Cockatoo Gives Anti-nesting Spikes the Bird in Viral Video,” *The Guardian*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/05/chick-flick-cockatoo-gives-anti-nesting-spikes-the-bird-in-viral-video>. Fischer, “Let Nature Play.”

⁴⁸ Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 64.

⁴⁹ “Riot Dog,” *Wikimedia Foundation*, Last modified October 30, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riot_dog. Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 115–117.

⁵⁰ Philip Hoare, “Sperm Whales in 19th Century Shared Ship Attack Information,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/17/sperm-whales-in-19th-century-shared-ship-attack-information>.

⁵¹ Cybele Knowles, “Boat-Sinking Orcas: Our New Folk Heroes,” *Earth First! Newswire*, <https://earthfirstjournal.news/2023/06/22/boat-sinking-orcas-our-new-folk-heroes/>.

ated, even in the wake of nuclear meltdown or generations of intensive farming.⁵² With these actions, nonhuman accomplices remind deep-green syndicalists that we aren't alone in struggling to decolonize and defend the planet. Observing life-promoting potentialities throughout the planet, Marcuse viewed "nature as an ally in the struggle" and declared "nature, too awaits the revolution!"⁵³

Technology of Liberation

Revolutionary transformation is symbiotically linked to a widespread adoption of what Marcuse called "technology of liberation." Ecologically sustainable, decentralizing and labor-saving, liberatory technology could replace the Global North's fossil fuel-based infrastructure and offer the South an alternative to growth-centered development. For example, the 50 open-source, low-tech tools comprising the Global Village Construction Set, including an affordable 3D printer and sawmill, are being designed to cumulatively offer "a modern standard of living" at just "two hours of work per day."⁵⁴

Global degrowth would make possible a very fast transition toward small-scale renewable energy. The growth-based models say that achieving 100% wind, water and solar energy will take decades, but they also purport that some 40% of today's energy consumption levels could be powered by wind, water and sunlight within just a few years.⁵⁵ If we relied only on that amount, and therefore achieved 100% green, renewable energy in under a decade, then that could be enough to converge the world's material living standards at a comfortable level, according to estimates by Joel Millward-Hopkins and co-authors and by Kris De Decker.⁵⁶ These studies suggest that the world can achieve living standards enjoyed today in the First World's voluntarily frugal countercultures where people reduce costs by sharing appliances, commutes, and often homes.

An example of liberatory technology is the multitude of knowledge-intensive small farming methods known as agroecology. Sustainably doubling yields in much of the Global South,⁵⁷ agroecology reduces labor in weeding and plowing and eliminates the application of herbicides

⁵² José M. Rey Benayas, "Rewilding: As Farmland and Villages Are Abandoned, Forests, Wolves and Bears Are Returning to Europe," *The Conversation*, July 2, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/rewilding-as-farmland-and-villages-are-abandoned-forests-wolves-and-bears-are-returning-to-europe-119316>. Stuart Thompson, "How Plants Reclaimed Chernobyl's Poisoned Land," *BBC*, July 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190701-why-plants-survived-chernobyls-deadly-radiation>.

⁵³ Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*.

⁵⁴ "About factor e farm," *Open Source Ecology*, <https://www.opensourceecology.org/about-factor-e-farm/>.

⁵⁵ Mark Jacobson, "Timeline and Land Area Required to Transition the All-Purpose End-Use Power of 143 Countries to 100 Percent Wind-Water-Solar and Five Reasons End-Use Demand Decreases 57.1 Percent Along the Way," December 20, 2019, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/efmh/jacobson/Articles/I/TimelineDetailed.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Joel Millward-Hopkins, Julia K. Steinberger, Narasimha D. Rao, and Yannick Oswald, "Providing Decent Living with Minimum Energy: A Global Scenario," *Global Environmental Change* 65 (2020): 102168. Kris De Decker, "How Much Energy Do We Need," *Low-Tech Magazine*, January 2018. <https://solar.lowtechmagazine.com/2018/01/how-much-energy-do-we-need/>.

⁵⁷ United Nations, "Eco-Farming Can Double Food Production in 10 Years, Says New UN Report," March 8, 2011, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2011/03/eco-farming-can-double-food-production-10-years-says-new-un-report>.

and pesticides.⁵⁸ Cuba's farmers have found agroecological methods dramatically improve both per-hectare and per-hour productivity.⁵⁹ While adopting agroecology would require people in the North to devote more time to tending farms and gardens, something that today's back-to-the-land and community-agriculture movements suggest would be welcomed by many people, the overwhelming majority of today's agricultural labor, which takes place off the farm in packing, transport and advertising, could be drastically reduced or eliminated in a decentralized food web.⁶⁰ Amir and Laila Kassim's 2021 edited collection *Rethinking Food and Agriculture* explores varieties of vegan agroecology that replace cattle manure with plant-based green manures and composted waste.⁶¹

Feeding the world population would be easier in a decentralized and mostly vegan world. Since the world's farmers already produce enough food to feed 12 to 14 billion human beings,⁶² overwhelmingly without genetically modified crops,⁶³ feeding today's eight billion or 2050s expected 10 billion would be very achievable by giving harvests to humans rather than to livestock, and by reducing the spoilage caused by food's long-distance transportation. Plant-based farming will also be generally consistent with localizing food production. For example, veganism could make the United Kingdom completely food self-sufficient and would theoretically allow the United States to feed an additional 350 million people, which is more than the country's current population.⁶⁴

Liberating land from animal agriculture and restoring it to wild grassland and forest, under Indigenous and local custodianship,⁶⁵ would sequester an estimated 800 billion tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere, when including above-ground and below-ground CO₂.⁶⁶ Sustainable forestry practices could sequester another 600 billion.⁶⁷ Even after ocean outgassing, the combined draw-down would approach historical land-use emissions since the dawn of agriculture. Combined

⁵⁸ Miguel A. Altieri, "Applying Agroecology to Enhance the Productivity of Peasant Farming Systems in Latin America," *Environment Development and Sustainability* 1, no. 3 (1999), 197–217.

⁵⁹ Peter Michael Rosset, Braulio Machín Sosa, Adilén María Roque Jaime, and Dana Rocío Ávila Lozano, "The Campesino-to-Campesino Agroecology Movement of ANAP in Cuba: Social Process Methodology in the Construction of Sustainable Peasant Agriculture and Food Sovereignty," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, 161–191.

⁶⁰ By one estimate, off-farm labor accounted for some eighty-six percent of agricultural labor. Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 211.

⁶¹ *Rethinking Food and Agriculture: New Ways Forward*, eds. Amir Kassam and Laila Kassam (Duxford: Woodhead Publishing, 2021).

⁶² International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, "Agriculture at a crossroads: IAASTD findings and recommendations for future farming," 2016, https://www.globalagriculture.org/fileadmin/files/weltagrarbericht/EnglishBrochure/BrochureIAASTD_en_web_small.pdf.

⁶³ John Fagan, Michael Antoniou, and Claire Robinson, *GMO Myths and Truths* (Earth Open Source, 2014), 328.

⁶⁴ Helen Harwatt and Matthew Hayek, "Eating Away at Climate Change with Negative Emissions," Harvard Law School's Animal Law & Policy Program, April 2019, <https://animal.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/Eating-Away-at-Climate-Change-with-Negative-Emissions%E2%80%9393%E2%80%93Harwatt-Hayek.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Somini Sengupta, Catrin Einhorn and Manuela Andreoni, "There's a Global Plan to Conserve Nature. Indigenous People Could Lead the Way," *New York Times*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/climate/nature-conservation-30-percent.html>.

⁶⁶ Matthew Hayek, Helen Harwatt, William Ripple, and Nathaniel Mueller, "The Carbon Opportunity Cost of Animal-sourced Food Production on Land," *Nature Sustainability* 4 (2021), 21–24.

⁶⁷ Kate Dooley, Doreen Stabinsky, Kelly Stone, Shefali Sharma, Teresa Anderson, Doug Gurian-Sherman, and Peter Riggs, "Missing Pathways to 1.5°C: The Role of the Land Sector in Ambitious Climate Action," *Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance*, <https://www.iatp.org/documents/missing-pathways-15degc>.

with a rapid energy transition, such measures bring radical climate and ecological targets within reach.⁶⁸

Total Liberation from Compulsory Work

Today's "anti-work" movement protests the deep psychic violence involved in forcing people to work for a boss or in a market economy. Productive activity and distribution itself are not the problem, as people often enjoy and find fulfillment in creating, producing, and sharing. Yet as 2020's economic slowdown offered masses worldwide a temporary respite from alienated labor, there was awareness that, in the words of one journalistic account, "the bulk of today's jobs aren't necessary; instead, they enforce wage slavery and deprive workers of the full value of their output."⁶⁹ Examining Marx's 1844 manuscripts, Marcuse emphasized the importance of production being voluntary, self-managed, and imaginative:

Labor in its true form is a medium for man's true self-fulfillment, for the full development of his potentialities; the conscious utilization of the forces of nature should take place for his satisfaction and enjoyment. In its current form, however, it cripples all human faculties and enjoins satisfaction.⁷⁰

Likewise, the ruthless imposition of work on animals, plants, ecosystems, and the Earth intrudes on these beings' dignity, liberty, and health. Capitalists have called exploited ecosystems "working landscapes," exploited farm animals "labouring cattle," genetically modified crops "living factories" and extracted hydrocarbons "energy slaves." As Indigenous Environmental Network director Tom Goldtooth summarizes, the dominant worldview posits that "Mother Earth is a slave." These sorts of exploitation go well beyond, say, the mutually beneficial relationship between a blind human and a well-treated guide dog or between an organic gardener and dignified plants. Various Indigenous cultures and radical ecological movements alike intuit that the Earth willingly offers human communities the materials to their vital needs.⁷¹ There is a difference, then, between sustainable use of the Earth's materials on one hand and the exploitative extraction and brutality characterizing capitalist production.

Combining the New Left's "refusal of work" and the green anarchists' reworking of Fanon's concept of "total liberation"—expanded to include the liberation of animals and the Earth—revolutionaries could propose a "Total Liberation from Compulsory Work." Drawing on the cell biologist and social theorist Barbara Ehrenreich's view of wild nature as fundamentally playful, a deep-green syndicalism would aim to eliminate compulsory work for humans, animals and ecosystems.

Emphasizing the inalienable right to relax and play, a deep-green syndicalism would share the Earth Liberation Front's solidarity with "the struggle of all species to be free"⁷² and the Industrial

⁶⁸ Dan Fischer, "Let Nature Play: A Possible Pathway of Total Liberation and Earth Restoration," *Green Theory & Praxis Journal* 14, no. 1 (2021), 8–29.

⁶⁹ Brian O'Connor, "The Rise of the Anti-work Movement," BBC, January 27, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/work-life/article/20220126-the-rise-of-the-anti-work-movement>.

⁷⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1941), retrieved from Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/reason/ch02-4.htm>.

⁷¹ Fischer, "Let Nature Play."

⁷² Earth Liberation Front, "Beltane, 1997," <https://www.iiipublishing.com/elf.htm>.

Workers of the World’s aim to “abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the earth.”⁷³ Insofar as we make demands, they might include: Abolish prisons, including zoos. Abolish torture, including experiments on animals. Abolish borders, including ecosystem-fragmenting highways. Abolish wars, including the war against Mother Earth. Free universal health care, including for animals.

Put aside the politicians’ inadequate 1.5-degree Celsius and “Half Earth” targets, and instead strive for truly precautionary limits. Returning below 1 degree Celsius is necessary to protect island and coastal communities and to stay clear of catastrophic tipping points. Instead of protecting only half the Earth for wild nature, let’s strive to protect at least 75%, allowing every species of plant to be covered by a communally preserved area and protecting the ocean’s populations and biodiversity.⁷⁴

Total liberation would not only protect human survival but would enable a life truly worth living. Humans should have abundant free time to hike with friends outdoors, to slowly travel the world by public buses and sail boats, to be hobbyist cooks, graffitists, scientists, hip-hoppers, punk rockers, gardeners, philosophers and rewilders.

Drawing on Marcuse’s vision of “miniskirts against the apparatchiks, rock ‘n’ roll against Soviet Realism,” today’s movements might take up the challenge of our establishment-friendly critics. A disparaging New York Times review of *An Essay on Liberation* mocked Marcuse’s proposed utopia as a “sexy heaven on Earth.”⁷⁵ At a time when scientists⁷⁶ and Indigenous prophecies⁷⁷ warn that the status quo could lead to an annihilation of biological life, or close, then the supposedly impossible alternative of utopia is an objective worthy of joyfully militant struggle.

⁷³ Industrial Workers of the World, <https://www.iww.org/constitution/>.

⁷⁴ See Fischer, “Let Nature Play.”

⁷⁵ Sidney Hook, review of *An Essay on Liberation*, by Herbert Marcuse, New York Times, April 20, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/04/20/archives/an-essay-on-liberation-by-herbert-marcuse-91-pp-boston-the-beacon.html>.

⁷⁶ Giovanni Strona and Corey J. Bradshaw, “Co-extinctions Annihilate Planetary Life during Extreme Environmental Change,” *Scientific Reports* 8, no. 1 (2018). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-018-35068-1>.

⁷⁷ Carol Jacobs, “Presentation to the United Nations July 18, 1985,” Akwesasne Notes, 1995, retrieved from https://ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/PresentToUN.html.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Dan Fischer
An Essay on Total Liberation
Marcusean Insights for Catalyzing Transformation
2024

Building Multispecies Resistance Against Exploitation: Stories from the Frontlines of Labor and
Animal Rights, edited by Zane McNeill (New York: Peter Lang, 2024)

usa.anarchistlibraries.net