

Will Ecology Become 'the Dismal Science'?

Murray Bookchin

December 1991

Almost a century and a half ago Thomas Carlyle described economics as "the dismal science." The term was to stick, especially as it applied to economics premised on a supposedly unavoidable conflict between "insatiable needs" and "scarce natural resources." In this economics, the limited bounty provided by a supposedly "stingy nature" doomed humanity to economic slumps, misery, civil strife, and hunger.

Today, the term "dismal science" appropriately describes certain trends in the ecology movement-trends that seem to be riding on an overwhelming tide of religious revivalism and mysticism. I refer not to the large number of highly motivated, well-intentioned, and often radical environmentalists who are making earnest efforts to arrest the ecological crisis, but rather to exotic tendencies that espouse deep ecology, biocentrism, Gaian consciousness, and eco-theology, to cite the main cults that celebrate a quasi-religious "reverence" for "Nature" with what is often a simultaneous denigration of human beings and their traits.

Mystical ecologists, like many of today's religious revivalists, view reason with suspicion and emphasize the importance of irrational and intuitive approaches to ecological issues. For the Reverend Thomas Berry, whom many regard as the foremost eco-theologian of our day, the "very rational process that we exalt as the only true way to understanding is by a certain irony discovered to be itself a mythic imaginative dream experience. The difficulty of our times is our inability to awaken out of this cultural pathology."

One does not have to be a member of the clergy to utter such atavistic notions. In a more secular vein, Bill Devall and George Sessions, professors of sociology and philosophy, respectively, who wrote *Deep Ecology*, one of the most widely read books in mystical ecology, offer a message of "self-realization" through an immersion of the personal self in a hazy "Cosmic Self," or, as they put it, a "'self-in-Self' where 'Self' stands for organic wholeness."

The language of *Deep Ecology* is distinctly salvational: "This process of full unfolding of the self can also be summarized in the phrase: 'No one is saved until we are all saved,' where the phrase 'one' includes not only me, an individual human, but all humans, whales, grizzly bears, whole rain-forest ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on."

This hortatory appeal raises some highly disconcerting problems. The words "and so on" omit the need to deal with pathogenic microbes, animal vectors of lethal diseases, earthquakes, and typhoons, to cite less aesthetically satisfying beings and phenomena than whales, grizzly bears,

wolves, and mountains. This selective view of "Mother Nature's" biotic and physiographic inventory has raised some stormy problems for mystical ecology's message of universal salvation.

Mystical ecologists tend to downgrade social issues by reducing human problems (a generally distasteful subject to them) to a "species" level-to matters of genetics. In the words of Pastor Berry, humanity must be "reinvented on the species level" by going "beyond our cultural coding, to our genetic coding, to ask for guidance." The rhetoric that follows this passage in *The Dream of the Earth* verges on the mythopoeic, in which our "genetic coding" binds us "with the larger dimensions of the universe"-a universe that "carries the deep mysteries of our existence within itself." Berry's exhortations enjoy great popularity these days, and have been quoted with approval even in the conventional environmental literature, not to speak of the mystical variety.

Such cosmological evangelism, clothed in ecological verbiage, deprecates humanity. When human beings are woven into the "web of life" as nothing more than one of "Mother Nature's" innumerable species, they lose their unique place in natural evolution as rational creatures of potentially unsurpassed qualities, endowed with a deeply social nature, creativity, and the capacity to function as moral agents.

"Anthropocentricity," the quasi-theological notion that the world exists for human use, is derided by mystical ecologists in favor of the equally quasi-theological notion of "biocentricity," namely, that all life-forms are morally interchangeable with one another in terms of their "intrinsic value." In their maudlin *Gaia Meditations*, two mystical ecologists, John Seed and Joanna Macy, enjoin us human mortals to "think to your next death. Will your flesh and bones back into the cycle. Surrender. Love the plump worms you will become. Launder your weary being through the fountain of life." In the mystically overbaked world of the American Sunbelt, such drivel tends to descend to the level of bumper-sticker slogans or is evoked in poetic recitations at various ash rams in Anglo-American cities and towns.

Taken as a whole, the crude reduction of the ecological crisis to biological and psychological sources has produced an equally reductionist body of "correctives" that makes the dismal economics of an earlier time seem almost optimistic by comparison. For many, perhaps most, mystical ecologists, the standard recipe for a "sustainable" future involves a lifestyle based on harsh austerity-basically, a rustic discipline marked by dietary simplicity, hard work, the use of "natural resources" only to meet survival needs, and a theistic primitivism that draws its inspiration from Pleistocene or Neolithic "spirituality" rather than from Renaissance or Enlightenment rationality.

Spirituality and rationality, which mystical ecologies invariably perceive in crassly reductionist and simplistic terms are pitted against each other as angels and demons. The mystics usually regard technology, science, and reason as the basic sources of the ecological crisis, and contend these should be contained or even replaced by toil, divination, and intuition. What is even more troubling is that many mystical ecologists are neo-Malthusians, whose more rambunctious elements regard famine and disease as necessary and even desirable to reduce human population.

The grim future evoked by mystical ecologists is by no means characteristic of the vision the ecology movement projected a generation ago. To the contrary, radical ecologists of the 1960s celebrated the prospect of a satisfying life, freed from material insecurity, toil, and the self-denial produced by market and bureaucratic capitalism.

This utopian vision, advanced primarily by social ecology in 1964 and 1965, was not antitechnological, antirational, or antiscientific. It expressed for the first time in the emerging ecology movement the prospect of a new social, technological, and spiritual dispensation. Social ecology

claimed that the idea of dominating nature stemmed from the domination of human by human, in the form not only of class exploitation but of hierarchical domination. Capitalism-not technology, reason, or science as such-produced an economy that was systemically anti-ecological. Guided by the competitive marketplace maxim "grow or die," it would literally devour the biosphere, turning forests into lumber and soil into sand.

Accordingly, the key to resolving the ecological crisis was not only a change in spirituality--and not a regression to pre-historic religiosity--but a sweeping change in society. Social ecology offered the vision of a nonhierarchical, communitarian society that would be based on directly democratic confederal communities with technologies structured around solar, wind, and renewable sources of energy; food cultivation by organic methods, a combined use of crafts and highly versatile, automatic, and sophisticated machinery to reduce human toil and free people to develop themselves as fully informed and creative citizens.

The disappearance of the utopian 1960s into the reactionary 1970s produced a steady retreat by millions of people into a spiritualistic inwardness that had already been latent in the counter-culture of the previous decade. As possibilities for social change began to wane, people sought a surrogate reality to veil the ills of the prevailing society and the difficulty of removing them. Apart from a brief interlude of environmental resistance to the construction of nuclear power plants, large pans of the ecology movement began to withdraw from social concerns to spiritual ones, many of which were crassly mystical and theistic.

In the universities, Lynn White Jr. whose advocacy of religious explanations for the ecological crisis began to give it an otherworldly character, initiated this withdrawal. Around the same time, Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* brought Malthus's ghost into ecological discourse in the academy, further deflecting the social thrust of the 1960s ecology movement into a demographic numbers game. Both of these academicians had advanced their views largely in *Science* magazine, which has only limited public outreach, so it fell to a California entomologist, Paul Ehrlich, to divert the ecological concerns of the early 1970s from the social domain to the single issue of population growth in a hysterical paper back, *The Population Bomb*, that went through numerous editions and reached millions of readers.

Writing like an SS officer touring the Warsaw ghetto, Ehrlich in the opening pages of his tract saw nothing but "People! People!"-failing to notice a vicious society that had degraded human lives. The slender thread that united White and more firmly, Hardin and Ehrlich was the nonsocial interpretation they gave to ecological problems, not any shared ecological overview.

Arne Naess, a Norwegian academic and mountain-climber, provided such an overview in 1973. He coined the term "deep ecology" and nurtured it as an ecological philosophy or sensibility that asks "deep questions" in contrast to "shallow ecology." Recycled into a form of California spiritualism by Devall and Sessions with a bizarre mix of Buddhism, Taoism, Native American beliefs, Heidegger, and Spinoza among others, mystical ecology was now ready to take off as a new "Earth Wisdom."

What catapulted this confused sensibility from the campus into newspaper head lines, however, was a wilderness movement, Earth First!, that began to take dramatic direct actions against the lumbering of old-growth forests and similar indecencies inflicted on wild areas by corporate America.

Earth First!'s founders, particularly David Foreman, had been conservationists who were weary of the ineffectual lobbying tactics of Washington-based conservation organizations. Inspired by Edward Abbey, the author of the highly popular novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*,

whose avowedly misanthropic views bordered on racism with its accolades to America's "northern European culture," Earth First!'s leaders began to seize upon deep ecology as a philosophy.

This is not to say that most Earth First!ers knew anything about "deep ecology" other than its claim to be "deep." But Devall and Sessions had placed Malthus in its pantheon of prophets and described "industrial society"-not capitalism-as the embodiment of the ills that mystical ecologists generally deride. Indeed, their book was distinctly wilderness-oriented, expressly "biocentric," and seemed to make short shrift of humanity's place in the cosmos.

Consistency has never been the strong point of any antirational movement, so it is not surprising that while Devall and Sessions piously extolled a "self-in-Self," a caring form of pantheism or hylozoism, Foreman did not hesitate to describe human beings as a "cancer" in the natural world, and quite surprisingly, Gary Snyder, the poet-laureate of the deep-ecology movement, described humans as "locust like."

Mystical ecology as a dismal science is, in fact, antihuman. Despite his gentle piety, Pastor Berry, for example, becomes positively ferocious in his treatment of human beings, describing them as "the most pernicious mode of earthly being." Indeed, "We are the termination, not the fulfillment, of the Earth process. If there were a parliament of creatures, its first decision might well be to vote the humans out of the community, too deadly a presence to tolerate any further. We are an affliction of the world, its demonic presence. We are the violation of Earth's most sacred aspects."

Ecclesiastic vitriol has often been more selective. In the best of cases, it has targeted the rich, not the poor; the oppressor, not the oppressed; the ruler, not the downtrodden. But mystical ecology tends to be more all-embracing. Berry's ecumenical "we," like his treatment of "human beings" as a species rather than as beings who are divided by the oppressions of race, sex, material means of life, culture, and the like, tends to permeate mystical ecology.

"We are all capitalists at heart," declares a well-intentioned Norwegian writer, Erik Dammann, whose *The Future in Our Hands* has been touted by Arne Naess as a virtual manifesto for social improvement. The homeless in American cities, the AIDS victims who have been left to die in Zurich's notorious needle park, the overworked people in the First World's mines and factories-none of these count for much in Dammann's plea that "we" in America and Europe reduce our consumption of goods in behalf of the Third World's poor.

Laudable as the goal of reduced consumption may seem, it is an ineffectual exercise in charity, not social mobilization; in humanitarianism, not social change. It is also an exercise in a superficial form of social analysis that grossly under plays the profoundly systemic factors that have produced overfed elites in all parts of the world and masses of underfed underlings. Nearly all we learn from Dammann's liberal good intentions is that an ecumenical "we" must be faulted for the ills of the world-a mystical "consumer" who greedily demands goodies that "our" overworked corporations are compelled to produce.

Despite the radical rhetoric to which Devall and Sessions resort, the principal *practical* recipe for social change they have to offer "us" in *Deep Ecology* is little more than a naive prayer. "Our first principle," they write, "is to encourage agencies, legislators, property owners and managers to consider flowing with rather than forcing natural processes." We should "act through the political process to inform managers and government agencies of the principles of deep ecology," to achieve "some significant changes in the direction of wise long-range management policies."

The watered-down liberalism of Devall and Sessions is echoed more explicitly in Paul and Anne Ehrlich's latest book, *Healing the Planet*, in which the authors declare their adherence to deep ecology, a "quasi-religious movement" (to use their own words) that "recognizes that a successful new philosophy cannot be based on scientific nonsense." Such denigration of science hardly befits writers whose reputation is based on their scientific credentials, with or without the vague use of the word "nonsense" to qualify their remarks. More guarded these days than in their earlier, somewhat hysterical tracts, the Ehrlichs offer something for everyone in a rather bewildering number of scenarios which show concern for the poor as well as the rich, the Third World as well as the First, even Marxists as well as avowed conservatives. But almost every important passage in the book repeats the refrain that marks their earlier works: "Controlling population growth is critical."

The Ehrlichs' treatment of fundamental social issues, however, reveals the extent to which they come to terms with the status quo. Our democratic "market-based economies [are] so far the most successful political and economic systems human beings have ever devised " That there is a systemic relationship between "market based" economy and the ruthless plundering of the planet hardly appears on the Ehrlichs' social horizon.

Naess is, perhaps, less equivocal--and more troubling--about his own solutions. As he weighs such alternative political philosophies as communism and anarchism, the father of deep ecology asserts, in his recently translated *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, that deep ecology has an affinity with "contemporary nonviolent anarchism." But the reader who might be stunned by this commitment to a libertarian alternative quickly learns that "with the enormous and exponentially increasing human population pressure and war or warlike conditions in many places, it seems inevitable to maintain some fairly strong central institutions"-or, put less obliquely than deep ecologists are wont to do, a "fairly strong" centralized state. Here, in fact, Naess's neo-Malthusianism and his pessimistic view of the human condition reinforce elitist beliefs in the ecology movement for state centralization and the use of coercion. The views of such deep ecologists as Christopher Manes, whose own colleagues regard him as an extremist, barely deserve serious discussion. Manes has welcomed the AIDS epidemic as a means of population control. Many mystical ecology writers echo his claim that "wilderness and not civilization is the real world."

One of the most strident condemnations of human beings as the source of the ecological crisis comes from James Lovelock, the architect of the "Gaia hypothesis," a mythopoeic notion that the Earth, personified as "Gaia" (the Greek goddess of our planet), is literally a living organism. In this theology, "we," needless to say, are not merely trivial and expendable but, as some Gaians have put it, parasitic "intelligent fleas" on the planet. For Lovelock, the word "we" replaces all distinctions between elites and their victims in a shared responsibility for present-day ecological ills.

"Our humanist concerns about the poor of the inner cities or the Third World," Lovelock de-claims, "and our near-obscure obsession with death, suffering, and pain as if these were evils in themselves--these thoughts divert the mind from our gross and excessive domination of the natural world. Poverty and suffering are not sent; they are the consequences of what we do."

It is "when we drive our cars and listen to the radio bringing news of acid rain [that] we need to remind ourselves that we, personally, are the polluters." Accordingly, "we are therefore accountable, personally, for the destruction of the trees by photochemical smog and acid rain." The lowly consumer is seen as the real source of the ecological costs, not the producers who

orchestrate public tastes through the mass media and the corporations who own and ravage Lovelock's divine Gaia.

The ecology movement is too important to allow itself to be taken over by airy mystics and reactionary misanthropes. The traditional labor movement, on which so many radicals placed their hopes for creating a new society, has withered, and in the United States the old time populist movements have died with the agrarian strata that provided them with sizable followings. Rooseveltian liberalism's future hangs in the balance as a result of the Reagan-Bush assault on New Deal reforms. The cooptation of nearly every worthwhile cause, including conventional environmentalism itself, is symbolized by the ease with which corporations tout the slogan EVERY DAY IS EARTH DAY!

But the natural world itself is not cooptable. The complexity of organic and climatic processes still defies scientific control, just as the marketplace's drive to expand still defies social control. The conflict between the natural world and the present society has intensified over the past two decades. Ecological dislocations of massive proportions may well begin to overshadow the more sensational issues that make headlines today.

A decisive collision looms: On one side is the grow-or-die economy, lurching out of control. On the other, the fragile conditions necessary for the maintenance of advanced life-forms on this planet. This collision, in fact, confronts humanity itself with sharp alternatives: an ecological society structured around social ecology's ideal of a confederal, directly democratic, and ecologically oriented network of communities, or an authoritarian society in which humanity's interaction with the natural world will be structured around a command economics and politics. The third prospect, of course, is the immolation of humanity in a series of ecological and irreversible disasters.

For the ecology movement to become frivolous and allow itself to be guided by various sorts of mystics would be unpardonable—a tragedy of enormous proportions. Despite the dystopian atmosphere that seems to pervade much of the movement, its utopian vision of a democratic, rational, and ecological society is as viable today as it was a generation ago.

The misanthropic strain that runs through the movement in the name of "biocentricity," antihumanism, Gaian consciousness, and neo-Malthusianism threatens to make ecology, in the broad sense of the term, the best candidate we have for a "dismal science." The attempt by many mystical ecologists to exculpate the present society for its role in famines, epidemics, poverty, and hunger serves the world's power elites as the most effective ideological defense for the extremes of wealth on the one side and poverty on the other.

It is not only the great mass of people who must make hard choices about humanity's future in a period of growing ecological dislocation; it is the ecology movement itself that must make hard choices about its sense of direction in a time of growing mystification.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Murray Bookchin
Will Ecology Become 'the Dismal Science'?
December 1991

http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/dismal/dismal.html

usa.anarchistlibraries.net