

Trumpeter (1995)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Postmodernism and Environmental Justice: The Demise  
Of The Ecology Movement?

George Sessions  
Sierra College

**George Sessions** is Professor of Philosophy at Sierra College, Rocklin, California. He is the co-author of *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, and editor of the anthology *Deep Ecology for the Twenty First Century*, Shambhala, Boston, 1995.

EARTH DAY 20 (1990) WAS A MINOR UPWARD blip in what has been a steady decline of the ecology movement since 1981 when the Reagan administration took office. The summer of 1988 was a disastrous period for the Earth (massive droughts possibly foretelling the onset of global warming) which led *Time* magazine to refer to the Endangered Earth, and as Planet of the Year on January 2, 1989. *Time* asked "What on Earth Are We Doing?" followed by articles on the worldwide loss of biodiversity, greenhouse gases, ozone layer depletion, toxic wastes and the pollution of the oceans, and worldwide human overpopulation. Earth Day 20 built upon this impetus, although as Mark Dowie points out, "corporate support and influence over events of the day was so pervasive that even *Time* magazine called Earth Day 1990 "a commercial mugging." (*Time* is the only major newsmagazine to even occasionally take the environmental crisis seriously: the others consistently reflect the corporate anti-environmental perspective.)

The 25th anniversary of Earth Day (1995) was an even bigger flop with Earth Day leaders defecting at the last minute and even more corporate influence and money in evidence: what journalists now refer to as "greenwashing". The best showing that could be mustered was the gathering in Washington, D.C. where environmental leaders could only decry the weakening and/or dismantling of 25 years of environmental legislation led by Newt Gingrich and the new Republican congress. Earth Day 25 essentially mirrored the confusion and disarray of the contemporary environmental/ecology movement. On many campuses Earth Day 25 was dutifully observed, and then immediately followed by even larger celebrations of Multicultural/Diversity Day. In the media, Earth Day 25 was exactly that - just another day - and was abruptly shunted to the side by the Simpson trial, the Oklahoma bombing, and the celebration of the anniversary of the U.N.

In addition to this second installment of the Republican party environmental backlash (now allied with the anti-environmental corporate-sponsored Wise Use movement), the national environmental organizations (Sierra Club, Audubon, Greenpeace) have lost 20 to 30

Protecting something as wide as this planet is still an abstraction for many. Yet I see the day in our lifetime that reverence for natural systems - the oceans, the rainforests, the soil, the grasslands, and all other living things - will be so strong that no narrow ideology based upon politics or economics will overcome it.

But are we witnessing the demise of the ecology movement (which held such promise in the 1960's and 70's) at a time when the Earth's ecosystems are in worse shape than ever before - even on the verge of collapse, as many of the world's leading scientists now claim?

Book reviews appearing in and around Earth Day 25 provide a basis for examining many of the issues involved. Part I of this essay casts a critical eye on new books which discuss the philosophical basis of the ecology/environmental movement.

Part II of this essay will focus on Gregg Easterbook's book (*. Moment on the Earth*, Viking, 1995) which received a very positive review in *The New York Review of Books* and was serialized in *The New Yorker* magazine. Following the lead of Julian Simon's head-in-the-sand technological optimism, Easterbrook out-and-out denies that there are serious global ecological problems, and urges full speed ahead on global industrial growth and development, with universal consumerism as a goal. A critique is also made of Mark Dowie's book (*Losing Ground*, MIT Press, 1995) which has also received positive reviews. Dowie claims that the traditional conservation movement has been essentially racist. Dowie shows little concern for the global ecological crisis as he argues that the environmental movement should be led by people of color, and should change its priorities from the global **ecological** crisis to the anthropocentric issue of environmental social justice.

The philosophical dimensions of radical environmentalism are explored in Erik Davis's "It Ain't Easy Being Green" in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (Feb. 95). He reviews three books: Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (1994); George Sessions (ed.) *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (1995); and Michael Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (1994).

Davis finds Andrew Ross's postmodernist attack on various environmentalist positions to be on target in a few cases but, overall, he takes issue with Ross's version of postmodern deconstructionism. Ross claims to be a "city dweller who does not regard himself as much of a naturelover." Nature lovers, Ross implies, are racist. Davis accuses Ross and other postmodernist urban intellectuals (and their boomer generation followers) of being thoroughly anthropocentric and committed exclusively to social justice in the current "politically correct" form of "multiculturalism".

When postmodernists hear *Nature*, they reach for their revolvers. [Much of] this is motivated in part by the threat hardcore [radical] ecology poses to postmodernism's most visibly progressive rhetoric: the politics of diversity. For if you take into account this planet's intense profusion of critters and habitats - now increasingly put to the knife by the relentless spread of human civilization - then the

rainbow multiplicity of "contested identities" starts looking more and more like a monoculture in motley disguise.

By way of some historical background, Michael Zimmerman points out, in *Contesting Earth's Future*, that postmodern deconstructionism arose in the 1960's when disillusioned French intellectuals turned away from Marxism (p. 91). And much of the basic Marxist orientation still lingers in their theorizing. So it is no surprise, then, that Ross adheres to the Marxist anthropocentric and relativistic doctrine of the social construction of all knowledge about nature - that Nature is a "social category". Ross claims that "what we know about nature is what we know and think about our own cultures."

Zimmerman also points out that the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss was a major influence on the rise of French postmodernism in the early 1960's. Levi-Strauss began the critique of Eurocentrism. He argued that the "savage mind" is just as complex as the "modern mind". European anthropocentric humanism, he claimed, has justified the extermination of thousands of species. Zimmerman points out that Levi-Strauss preferred "the humility of tribal people" and, like deep ecologists, he asserted that "care about mankind without a simultaneous solidarity-like caring for all other forms of life...[leads] mankind to self-oppression and self-exploitation." Later postmodernists (Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard), Zimmerman points out, have "focused on human and social and cultural affairs, thus minimizing Levi-Strauss's and Heidegger's criticism of modernity's assault on nature" (p. 92). Ross, for example, attacks environmentalists for promoting the "Neoromantic" idea that primary peoples lived in harmony with their environment. Thus, there has been a complete reversal, by contemporary urban anthropocentric postmodernists, of Levi-Strauss's early postmodernist position.

Zimmerman further points out that postmodernists, in addition to their view of Nature as a "social construct," also reject any concept of "objective" truth. Again, as a holdover from Marxist doctrine, postmodernists claim that "what passes for objective truth is a construction generated by power-interested elites" (p. 93). And so, when 1575 of the world's leading scientists from 69 countries signed the "World Scientist's Warning to Humanity" in 1993, claiming that "Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course...A great change is required...if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated", this statement would be construed by postmodernists not as an attempt at an objective statement and warning about the ecological state of the world, but rather as a self-serving conspiratorial "power-play" on the part of the "elitist" scientists involved. As Zimmerman puts it, "To counter the power elite's hegemonic grip on truth, postmodern theorists maintain that "truth should result from negotiations in which as many [multicultural] voices as possible are heard" (p. 93).

Recently, an advocate of human "environmental justice", Carl Anthony ("E-copsychology and the Deconstruction of Whiteness," in Theodore Roszak (ed.)

*Ecopsychology*, Sierra Club Books, 1995) uses precisely this approach to truth when he claims,

People of color often view alarmist threats about the collapse of the ecosystem as the latest stratagem by the elite to maintain control of political and economic discourse.

But what if people of color, and others, are mistaken that these so-called "alarmist threats" are unjustified, that, on the contrary, they accurately portray the contemporary ecological state of the world? Would this awareness then serve to undercut the Marxist-postmodernist "power elite" theory of truth? And just what is the status of this sociological and relativistic analysis of truth? Is it an empirical claim capable of being falsified? Or is it an empty tautology, an "article of faith"? Based, as it is, on an inevitable psycho/social conflict model of human relationships, it should arouse suspicion that these epistemological doctrines conveniently serve to bolster a particular ideology and the anthropocentric social/political agendas of Marxists and postmodernists. To a logician's ear, this analysis of truth (in which the emphasis is not on what is claimed and how it is documented, but rather on *who and which social group* says it) amounts to an immense *ad hominem* fallacy.

Furthermore, the epistemological alternatives are not exhausted by (1) some absolute irrevocable theory of pristine "objective" truth versus its polar opposite in the (2) cynical elite "power-play" interpretations of the postmodernists. It is possible, for instance, to be a philosophical skeptic with regard to absolute truth and ultimate human knowledge (as I tend to be) and yet not subscribe to the postmodernist "power elite" theory of truth. With no "objective" truth to be found, for example, from the biological and other sciences, and with Nature conceived of as a social construct (a "social category"), the fate of the Earth, and the destinies of wild creatures and ecosystems, is to be decided anthropocentrically by the desires of the affected peoples and cultures of the world: through human compromise, negotiation, and, as Zimmerman puts it, by *humans* "contesting Earth's future."

These postmodernist doctrines, of course, make hash out of the claims by Deep Ecologists and conservation biologists that the independent reality and integrity of the Earth's wild ecosystems, biodiversity, and evolutionary processes have intrinsic value and must be protected for their own sakes, for the ecological health of the Earth, and for the ultimate well-being of humans who are embedded in these processes. These postmodernist views have prompted a leading conservation biologist, Michael Soulé, to edit a recent collection (*Reinventing Nature?: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, Island Press, 1994) which takes issue with postmodernism's anthropocentric cultural relativism.

Reviewer Erik Davis has some good things to say about *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* and quotes extensively from a number of papers in the collection;

but mostly from papers which promote his favored position which he calls a "critical postmodern ecology." What Davis objects to most strenuously is what most Deep Ecology theorists consider to be the "heart" of the Deep Ecology movement: the ecocentric Deep Ecology platform with its call for ecological activism. Davis claims that:

Much of *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* seems hunkered down behind the sand bags. Eight point platforms, tedious term definitions, and low degrees of rhetorical play show a movement just poking out of its self-righteous shell.

Davis does not take the trouble to understand either the significance or the function of the Deep Ecology platform, which is designed to provide a universal unifying ecocentric prospective for protecting and restoring the Earth's wildness. Nor does he either see or understand the extent to which Deep Ecology promotes cultural diversity; in terms of philosophical/religious justifications for the platform, and in terms of a diversity of human cultures. Michael Zimmerman once referred to Arne Naess as a "celebrant of diversity," of human individual and cultural diversity, and of biological diversity.

Davis accuses Naess of being of "the old school" which apparently means, for Davis, that he is not a postmodernist, gaining inspiration instead from Spinoza and from Gandhi's Hinduism and civil disobedience. Davis also claims that Deep Ecologists have something to learn from Murray Bookchin's Social Ecology with his anarchic tribalism "which puts social concerns at the fore." Deep Ecologists generally prefer the *ecocentric* tribalism of the reinhabitory/bioregionalism developed by Gary Snyder, Peter Berg, and the ecologist Raymond Dasmann which does not put people first.

It is also unfortunate and curious that Davis neglects to discuss the main distinction, raised in the book, between the domestic and the wild, and the crucial Deep Ecology concern, derived from Thoreau, for protecting and nurturing both human and nonhuman wildness. Thoreau's famous statement "In Wildness is the Preservation of the World" is a cornerstone of Deep Ecology and conservation biology, but it apparently makes no sense, or has little relevance, to Marxists and postmodernists. In *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, attention is called to the claims of Paul Shepard (in *Nature and Madness*, 1982) that humans are genetically programmed for wild environments, and that there is a genetically based human ontogeny that involves bonding with wild Nature. Shepard's theory holds that modern urban humans who have not bonded with wild Nature are "ontogenetically stuck," remaining in some ways in an adolescent stage of human development.

The idea that humans have a universal genetically-based human nature is one of the *major* areas of disagreement between Deep Ecologists and Marxist/postmodernists. The latter, harkening back to older Enlightenment/social science humanist views

of humanity's uniqueness, separation from Nature, and visions of total human freedom, hold that humans are not genetically hardwired for anything in particular: the future for humanity is totally open. Theodore Roszak once argued that urban intellectuals have a special responsibility to address the ecological "planetary emergency" (*Person/Planet*, 1978, pp. 271-82). Shepard's theory may help explain why it is so difficult for them to do so.

Postmodern deconstructionists have deconstructed certain ethnocentric aspects of Eurocentrism (although ecophilosophers and environmental historians have also been deconstructing Eurocentrism beginning at least with Thoreau). But these urban theorists have yet to deconstruct the biases of their own Enlightenment anthropocentric humanism, their antipathy to such modern sciences as anthropology, biology, and genetics which cast a new and important light on the universality of human nature and, perhaps most importantly, their profound alienation from wild nature. It seems clear that they would be much closer to the mark today if they had followed the lead of one of their founders, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.

Erik Davis saves his highest praise for Michael Zimmerman's *Contesting Earth's Future*. This is consistent with Davis's sympathies toward the development a new "critical postmodern ecology." I admire the erudition, immense scholarship, and, for the most part, the attempt at fairmindedness which has gone into Zimmerman's book, but I cannot accept the postmodernist anthropocentric and relativistic conclusions he arrives at: namely, that the future of the Earth should properly be determined mainly by the "contesting" desires of different *human* ethnic groups and philosophical orientations. On this view, the biological integrity of the Earth is left entirely out of the equation. Zimmerman suggests, in keeping with postmodernism's relativistic theory of truth, that ecocentrism is a power-motivated position; even Naess's Ecosophy T, he claims, "is only one power-perspective among others." Zimmerman faults Deep Ecology for not being willing "to take the risk of *contesting* Earth's future in cultural and political arenas populated by people with very different perspectives." (pp. 97-104). Zimmerman may or may not be aware that this is an ineradicably anthropocentric perspective in which it is assumed that humans, of whatever perspectives, have the right to determine the fate of other species and the Earth as a whole.

The global scientific community has fortunately begun to take strong stands on protection of the Earth's ecological systems and its nonhuman inhabitants. For instance, in the United States, the National Academy of Science has just issued a report supporting the Endangered Species Act, and recommending that its provisions be strengthened. (*San Francisco Chronicle*, May 25, 1995). The habitat of endangered species should not be compromised, negotiated, or "contested" by conflicting human interests.

The main goal of the ecocentric Deep Ecology ecological movement is to end the domination and power-relationships modern humans have over nonhuman Nature, and to set up realistic biological conditions under which the wild species

and biodiversity of the Earth can exist and flourish. The Deep Ecological approach to "contesting Earth's future" is to distinguish between the vital and nonvital needs of humans. It is proposed that when the nonvital needs of humans come in conflict with the vital needs of nonhumans, the vital needs of nonhumans to exist and flourish have priority. For Arne Naess, the full "richness and diversity of all Life on Earth" must be protected. It is difficult for me to imagine how one could persuasively argue that this ecocentric norm is merely another human power perspective, as the postmodernists and Zimmerman would have it. On the other hand, the Marxist/postmodernist concepts of Nature as a "social category", of "reinventing Nature," and of human needs and desires as the basis for "contesting Earth's future" (whether in a "multicultural" dimension or not) help insure that human power relationships over nonhuman Nature are maintained and perpetuated, as the biological integrity and viability of the Earth continues to be relentlessly destroyed.

Over the last few years, Zimmerman's main efforts have been directed toward bringing together and integrating all the "voices" of "radical ecology," Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, and Ecofeminism, and now "critical post-modernism." A new slant on the "radical" *ecological* pretensions of Social Ecology, Eco-Marxism and Ecofeminism has recently been provided by the sociologist Albert Bergesen (in his paper "Deep Ecology and Moral Community" in R. Wuthnow (ed.) *Rethinking Materialism*, Erdmans, 1995). He points out that:

The claim that we are entering a period of post-socialist, post-Marxist, or post-Enlightenment moral projects has been raised before, but the post-modernist pluralistic celebration of the distinctions of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference, while a new particularism different from the hegemonic universalism of traditional social, economic, and political theory, represents only a further advancement of the rights of members of the human community.

Bergesen claims that eco-Marxism, Social Ecology, and Ecofeminism remain essentially anthropocentric:

There are representatives of half-way positions - half social project and half ecology project. But note that the human and social half comes first, because for many, as Murray Bookchin explains, "all ecological problems are social problems"...For Bookchin, humans and their society come first...[Similarly for the eco-Marxists] in this adaptation, as in the adaptation by social ecologists, the human and the social still come first.

This is underscored by the eco-Marxist David Pepper in his recent book (*Eco-socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice*, 1993) when he claims that

"social justice...or the increasing global lack of it, is the most pressing of all environmental problems." The Australian political scientist Robyn Eckersley ("The Road to Ecotopia: Socialism versus Environmentalism" *Trumpeter* 5, 1988) has pointed to the problems eco-Marxists have in comprehending the ecocentric perspective:

The Marxist response has been slow to respond to the challenge thrown down by [environmental ethics] and the science of ecology, both of which underscore the interrelatedness and interdependence between the human and nonhuman worlds and the importance of preserving wilderness and biological diversity. Indeed, it is these latter arguments that Marxist scholars have found to be the furthest removed from their traditional concerns (and consequently the hardest to make sense of), especially where they challenge the essentially *human-centered* philosophical roots of Marxism in arguing for the *intrinsic* value of nonhuman phenomena.

Bergesen points out that another

example of the social/environmental mix is ecofeminism. Ecofeminists, like the social ecologists and eco-Marxists, argue that social relations will have to change if our relations with nature are to change...The radical analyses of social ecology, eco-Marxism, and ecofeminism are 'radical' only when the human species is the totality of analysis...Here again we see the anthropocentrism of assuming the central place of humankind: changing gender relations will change the relations between humankind and nature.

When Ecofeminists claim that "the environment is a feminist issue" (like the Eco-Marxist assertion that the most important environmental issue is social justice) this insures that ecological/environmental issues will be seen from a particular perspective, an anthropocentric one. It's the old story of the tail wagging the dog.

For Bergesen, Deep Ecology provides the only genuine ecological paradigm shift:

Marxism versus liberalism, capitalism versus socialism, patriarchy versus feminism, or the developed versus the underdeveloped countries - these are simply debates within the human community. This discourse has its place and is important. But it can no longer have the hegemony - in scientific theory or moral discourse - that it has had over the past six hundred years. The era of human-only discourse is at an end. The era of eco-human discourse is just beginning...The social model and the deep ecology model represent two

fundamentally different approaches that have different implications for strategies of change.

Erik Davis claims that Zimmerman, in promoting a new "critical postmodernism, embraces "most of [Donna] Haraway's famous cyborg manifesto..." As a socialist feminist and critical postmodernist, Haraway is a writer with a large following. As Zimmerman explains, Haraway's "cyborgs" are artifacts:

...part human, part machine. Although cyborgs are usually associated with science fiction, Haraway asserts that because we are intricately involved with...and shaped by an enormous complex of technological systems, we are *already* cyborgs (pp. 356-7).

Haraway rejects our organic origins. She encourages women not to seek organic wholeness. Rather, Nature must be reinvented, as we "celebrate the merging of the organic with the mechanical, the natural with the artificial." If there is no genetic basis for a universal human nature, then humans can successfully become anything: even cyborgs! Women, according to Haraway, must not shy away from the new communications and biotechnological future, for they may be able to help move it in the direction of creativity and freedom, thus ameliorating its negative aspects. Rejecting Thoreau's maxim to "let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine," Haraway seems to counsel "if you don't think you can lick'em, then join'em." Zimmerman claims that "overall, I have high regard for Haraway's remarkable Cyborg Manifesto" (p. 369). This is a radical turnabout for Zimmerman. As a major scholar and proponent of Heidegger's thought for over 20 years, Zimmerman also accepted Heidegger's radical critique of the diminishment of both humans and Nature as a result of modern technology's approach to understanding Being. As a result of recently rethinking Heidegger's relation to Nazi fascism, Zimmerman now rejects Heidegger and, unfortunately, Heidegger's critique of the modern technological world, as well.

Apart from the abhorrent dehumanizing visions of humans as cyborgs, I am quite convinced, along the lines of the social/political analyses of Huxley, Orwell, and Ellul, that "a technological society will be totalitarian regardless of what political structures permit its development." In thinking otherwise, Haraway exhibits considerable political naivete. Jerry Mander (*In the Absence of the Sacred*, 1991) updates the visions of Huxley and Orwell by providing a devastating critique of contemporary corporate/consumer megatechnopian visions of the economic "new world order."

Haraway faults Deep Ecologists and biologists for attempting to speak for the indigenous peoples and endangered species of the Amazonian rainforest. The central concern for this "collective entity," claims Haraway, is social justice, and that they be allowed to speak for themselves (Zimmerman, pp. 365-66). For

Jerry Mander, who has spent considerable time studying the political problems of, and being with, Fourth World tribal peoples, they are appreciated not only for their multicultural diversity, but also for their ecocentric philosophies and cultures which respect the wild world and plants and animals. As Mander points out (*In The Absence of the Sacred*), Fourth World tribal peoples have already spoken out. They want nothing to do with the monocultural megatechnological/consumer society (and its satellite television) that is destroying their cultures and exploiting their wild lands. Other books which also discuss the resistance of Third and Fourth World peoples to the invasion of megatechnological society are Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, (1992) and Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (1991). While explicitly concerned with social justice, Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto hardly sets an appropriate example for, or shows solidarity with, these tribal peoples worldwide who are fighting for their lives, cultures, and homelands. I view Mander's *In the Absence of the Sacred* and *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* as complementary and companion volumes.

---

#### Citation Format

Sessions, George (1995) Postmodernism and Environmental Justice: The Demise Of The Ecology Movement? *Trumpeter*: 12, 3. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.12.3.12>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.  
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details