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Deep Ecology in the Line of Fire

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FOR THOSE WHO NOT ONLY SUPPORT THE deep ecology movement but also find its terminology fairly adequate to express their attitudes, it is encouraging to see how far seemingly vociferous critics really agree with us - far enough for warm cooperation. As an example I shall refer to the 251-page book by Martin W. Lewis with the strong title *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism*, Duke University Press, 1992.

In this book the diagnosis of the ecological crisis is as serious and as severe as that of the deep ecology movement. And the goal in terms of relations between humans and nature is as ambitious and radical as any supporter of the deep ecology movement could wish for. Lewis explicitly expresses agreement with the ultimate goal. Very encouraging! But as to means he seems to have concrete ideas completely foreign to the supporters of the deep ecology movement. Concrete in the sense that he specifies what big "companies like Du Pont" can do for us. His type of green society, a special kind of thoroughly and completely industrialist state, is, *or at least seems to be*, diametrically different from any green utopia envisaged by supporters of the deep ecology movement. Two quotations from Lewis's work suggest a new practical way rather than a new philosophy:

If we are lucky, the commercialization of photovoltaic solar energy will come in good part from struggling American start-ups like Chronar. It now seems far more likely, however, that this technology will be dominated by such vast industrial concerns as Hitachi, Sanyo, and Fujitsu (*The Economist*, 19-25 May 1990). The engineers, investors, and managers of a company like Chronar should be hailed and supported as environmental heroes, not denounced as technocratic and capitalistic eco-villains (p. 16).

The future may yet be in plastics. Let us hope that companies like Du Pont can create artificial fibers sophisticated enough that we no longer need to deplete the earth's aquifers, clear its tropical forests, drain its wetlands, and pour massive quantities of biocides on all of these environments in order to grow the cotton that affluent American consumers consider so wonderfully "natural" (p. 16).

The greatest hope for virtually complete decoupling may lie in the so called nanotechnology revolution (Drexler & Peterson, 1991). If its

proponents are correct, the nano techniques of molecular assembly will allow us to build superior goods using only a small fraction of the energy and materials/and square miles/now required. Indeed, Drexler goes so far as to argue that by mining surplus atmospheric carbon dioxide we will be able to provide most of the raw materials needed for the next economy. Moreover, not only would a nanotech economy spare the natural world of any noxious pollutants, but it would also allow a truly massive return of land to natural communities (p. 17).

According to Lewis, green extremists "seek to reconnect humanity with nature, I counter that human society should strive to separate itself as much as possible from the natural world, a notion that has aptly been labeled "decoupling" by the geographer Simmons (1989:384)." (p. 16) One of the "fundamental theses" of his book Lewis formulates thus: "...only by disengaging our economy from the natural world can we allow adequate space for nature itself" (p. 16). In order to massively restore the natural landscapes, for instance those of England, I suppose not only the number of cattle would have to be drastically reduced, but also the square miles of agriculture. Theoretically, one may assume that industry will be able to find high quality substitutes for what we get today from the vast areas dominated by cattle. There is among the supporters of the deep ecology movement a tendency to be sceptical about substitutes, but the ecological crisis may eventually force us to extended use of them.

The new kind of industrial society Lewis believes in is not supposed to necessitate change of the economic system or the representative democracy. And it satisfies a norm: "Nature for Nature's Sake - And Humanity for Humanity's." (p. 17)

Lewis calls his approach Promethean Environmentalism, and it "values progress as much for the benefits that it may confer to the human-ravished landscape as for promises it gives to the human community." (p. 16).

As a thought-experiment let us assume that the industries in State A accomplishes what Lewis hopes will be accomplished, *and* that people vote for decoupling, *and* that it is well on the way to succeed in large scale restoration of ecosystems etc. Three gigantic accomplishments! Incidentally, I assume that 'decoupling in *one* country' is feasible - a sort of assumption Stalin made in contrast to Trotsky, relative to communism.

Question: how would supporters of the deep ecology movement react? Would they change their strategies and propose that the decoupling from nature should start in their own countries? Some would, I am sure, say something like this: "Obviously you would have needed a very strong deep ecology movement in State

A. You needed a strong endorsement of the revolutionary (?) principle ‘nature for the sake of nature’.” Even if industry happened to find ways and means to disengage the US economy from nature, who would be personally interested in carrying it out? Practically only those who felt that natural communities have intrinsic value. Others would have found it sufficient to support policies to make great ecological catastrophes very unlikely. In short, the great achievements in State A must have a deep ecology movement which *persuaded* a majority to vote for policies which are as radical as those suggested by Lewis.

Other supporters of the deep ecology movement are likely to hold that in the long run the substitutes by the industry might have bad long range effects. Some would suspect that it would be difficult to maintain cultural diversity.

Enough about the very hypothetical question of how supporters of the deep ecology movement would react to the news of *an ecosophically successful, fully industrialized state*. Let us have a look at the critique Lewis directs against the ‘ecoextremists’. It is not so interesting because he takes some of the utopian visions and slogans of supporters of the deep ecology movement not as such, but more like plans of actions and blueprints for society. He does not seem interested in the actual work the supporters do, economically, socially and politically. This is a pity because it may take time before industries invents the products Lewis hopes they will produce, and in the mean time lots of environmental conflicts need to be faced.

As to philosophy, Lewis seems to assume that if one is inspired by Spinoza, one believes in the literal truth of what Spinoza writes or in the validity of his ”proofs”. His positive attitude towards the so-called postmodernism, makes it natural for him to reject expressions of (fragments) of total views, of *Lebens-und Weltanschauungen*. (Not only Goethe and those who tried to kill Hitler, but *Hitler himself* had a philosophy of life. So better keep off? No.)

The utopian dreams of some supporters of the deep ecology movement are dangerous, especially in the United States, because ”Americans as a people seem uniquely drawn to such fantasies.” (p. 249).

By attacking the foundations of scientific research and technical development, radical environmentalism would hasten the decline of the United States relative to Japan. In so doing, I believe it would threaten the ecological future of the planet.... While Japan is ahead in basic energy and resource efficiency, Americans as a whole are more concerned about the preservation of nature - for nature’s sake - than are the Japanese. Japanese protests over such outrages as the mass slaughtering of dolphins are the merest of whispers. (p. 14).

Many supporters of the deep ecology movement are critical of the special kind of scientific enterprise within industrial societies and also of their technical development, but they scarcely attack the foundations of scientific research (about which they know very little, I suppose). None of the 15 or 20 theoreticians of the deep ecology movement attacks the foundations. And no one suggests political means other than the democratic. But they warn: great catastrophes may create conditions for dictatorial measures. So, hurry up: vote for ecologically responsible policies! And don't forget that the eradication of war and debilitating injustice is implied!

It is difficult not to feel a little proud to imagine that we the deep ecology "extremists" may influence the relation between two giant powers, and heartened by Lewis's reference to the preservation of nature for *nature's sake*. But perhaps Lewis imagines that bioregionalists such as Gary Snyder, lives a "simple, rustic life" and even wishes to force others to do the same? To me bioregionalists seem to live a rich life and they try (often rather unsuccessfully) to support appropriate political *means*. Lewis is quite right in being sceptical about how many young people would actually like to live in a severely democratic, decentralized, homogeneous "rustic" society.

It is difficult not to associate Lewis's term "moderate liberals and conservatives" with people in Congress and the Senate. But, as I have already suggested, I don't see any possibility that they would formulate and fight for the very strong policies in favor of "humans for humanity's" *and* nature for nature's sake with large scale *restoration* of natural landscapes. People like Lewis are needed, and also people he would consider non-extremist supporters of the deep ecology movement. They will do the work of formulating the goals, and, of course, they will insist that the long range human life quality will not be reduced. (Humanity for humanity's sake!) I would not be invited by Lewis to join in because of my inveterate "modernism", but I am sure he would like me to read what the moderates propose in order to disengage the United States' economy from the natural world.

In what follows I shall go into some details in discussing Lewis's treatment of the writers he calls "eco-extremists".

What about the eco-radicals as a political and civilizational threat? "If green extremism rejects representative democracy in theory, its response to existing American governmental institutions is one of extraordinary contempt. Most eco-radicals would like to demolish our entire political foundation, and many argue that all national-level structures are inherently destructive of the environment." (p. 40). In the 60s the theories of peaceful anarchism suggested by Kropotkin and others were adopted by many environmental activists. Later extreme decentralization, like the *panchayat* proposed by Gandhi, was seen only as a very distant possibility. Since the 60s the willingness and eagerness of the leaders of local communities in non-industrial areas to invite industry has been disheartening and made some centralization inevitable. And today few

seem to like to *spend their lives* in local communities. There must be larger unities, democratic countries, with fairly strong governments - able to stop the mindless "development" of areas not yet dominated by the rapidly expanding human enterprise. Not one single deep ecology theoretician, or theoretician with closely related views, has a belief in any governmental system other than democracy. That does not mean that they are not critical of the working of contemporary democracies. And the severity of criticism is not more marked than that of millions of mainstream democratic voters. Supporters giving vent to *extremist utterances* (according to my own view) are no danger to the main efforts of non-extremist supporters of the movement, and if there is any sign of antidemocratic tendencies anywhere, I should like to get informed. An excellent introduction to political theory suitable for the deep ecology movement is furnished by Robyn Eckersley.¹ Dictatorships of any kind are shunned. Perhaps only one development might be worse according to most of us: the possibility that 'nature takes over'.

It is important to repeat that it is the function of the proposed so-called 8 points of deep ecology, [see pages 143 - 144 of this issue, Editor] to formulate in a few words what characterizes it as a part of the *general* ecological movement. And ecology is only one, however important, of many areas of political concern. Peace, justice, economy, education.... They all hang together. The deep ecology movement as such does not - as I see it - prescribe any definite kind of governmental form. Its main political requirement is that a government does not violate the state of intrinsic value of every human being. (Point 1 of the platform.)

The quantification implied in the last quotation from Lewis - "most eco-radicals" is interesting. Lewis quotes a few writers, but some are scarcely supporters of the deep ecology movement. And in this movement, as in other social movements, writers are in a tiny minority. In great direct actions one has the opportunity to meet 'ordinary' supporters. They are not 'ecotremists'.

People who have carried through empirical research, for instance Lester Milbrath, conclude that deep ecology supporters and other radical greens *tend* to shy both extreme right and left. Subversives? Revolutionaries? If revolutionaries, only in a Gandhian way, and not more radical than Lewis in his 'reformist' dream of disentangling the US from nature.

A social movement cannot live without slogans, but there must be communication of a non-slogan character to clarify terms. From Lewis as from many other critics, we may learn to be more careful with slogans. "Decrease of material consumption!" is a good slogan but it must be (and is) repeated: it is directed against the consumption levels of rich nations and reading Lewis's interpretation (p. 28), it must be emphasized that it is not identical with a slogan. "Minimize material consumption!" Why environmental masochism? The planet is immensely big and rich. It lets a vast number of humans satisfy more than their vital needs, and it allows them to enjoy some unecological habits. But

the annual "Gaia Gift" - a gift that Gaia bestows upon us to let us interfere with ecosystems and resources on Earth - is finite, and with 8 or 10 thousand million people the per capita gift must naturally be smaller than with, say, *one thousand million*.

The level of material standard of living of the poor should, and must be expected to increase considerably. If their present so-called 'development' does not change character, but apparently copies Western consumerism, then *it is up to the West* to change its ways as soon as possible.

To minimize interference in the ecosystems is a queer goal: high quality of life requires a substantial interference even if human population is kept low and technology is ecologically much more advanced. Even our quality homes and gardens require considerable interference. Again: why environmental masochism?

Slogans suggesting that *Homo sapiens* is just one species among millions of species are misleading. It may be constructed as underrating human's unique, vast capacities compared to any other species. Proper education develops concern for both humans and non-humans, but some human environments makes such education impossible. Lewis *chooses* an extremist interpretation of the slogan that advocates of "soft variant" deep ecology (to which I seem to belong) "denounce all humanistic philosophies" - meaning philosophies asserting that humans deserve a special status? But perhaps I am not, as others, consistent enough, not in any history of philosophy perhaps, in following my ideas to their pitiful extremes?

One idea I am said to have is such that if I were consistent it would lead to sheer nonsense, humanistic or non-humanistic. When I introduce a new expression, for instance, "biospherical egalitarianism" I do not have the feeling that it expresses a fairly definite idea or notion *before I define* what the expression is supposed to express in *my* texts. But it seems too much to expect that readers accept our freedom to decide what an expression should be taken to express in our texts. Consequently some readers say that my idea of biospherical egalitarianism, if developed consistently, implies such and such completely absurd opinions. *But a word is not an idea*. What some authors do is to disregard my definition of the expression "biospherical egalitarianism". In its place they concentrate their attack on ideas that *might* be expressed by the expression, telling me that if I were consistent I would have to hold *those* for completely foreign ideas. According to my definition the phrase expresses *the idea that there is value that every living being has in common, namely intrinsic value*. In this they are equal.

The view does not even logically *imply* that the intrinsicness has degrees or does not admit degrees. Nor does it in any way reduce the status of *Homo sapiens*, its gigantic creativity compared even to apes, the unique complexity of human communication, the capacity of self realization, and so on. In short, I could, of course, have used other expressions, less provocative than the one

I have chosen, but to me the idea that living beings other than humans may *only* have instrumental value, not intrinsic value, is important and influential, but so is the idea that only some kinds have that status. This I found to be a sufficiently serious situation to justify a somewhat bombastic expression. But it seems that more and more people accept the *idea* expressed by my provocative term, and it may be time to give the idea a simpler name.

Lewis poses with delicate irony a pertinent question: "But one must wonder whether self-proclaimed ecologists affirming their communion with nature through shamanistic rituals will supply the world with solar technologists. I suspect rather that such delivery will come, if at all, from high-tech corporations - from firms operating in a social, economic, and technical milieu almost wholly removed from the intricate webs of the natural world." (p. 16). What have theorists of the deep ecology movement meant by the word "deep"? A relatively thorough reading of my and others' writings will reveal clearly that they have not meant at all to classify *people* into deep and shallow. The acknowledged definition has to do with a person's *total argumentation patterns* within the general ecological movement. (I have reiterated in several of my articles that to use the term "deep ecologist", and hence "shallow ecologist" is a very unfortunate choice of words if not an outright mistake.) How do people argue in support of their decisions and opinions? Why should there be a radical change? "Radical change *is* necessary" (p. 25). People who include arguments such as "for nature's own sake" cannot avoid what has been called philosophy of nature. A philosophy of nature tends to touch upon philosophy of mind and of the relation between humans and living beings: feelings of relatedness, feelings of concern for their own sake. Asked how they justify such an attitude they do not find *arguments*, or if they do, they furnish premises of some sort, but the process does not extend indefinitely. We must stop somewhere as Aristotle insisted. Deepness of an argumentation pattern is defined as bringing the arguing into the realm of philosophy or religion. A Christian may, for instance, roughly argue this way in favor of the intrinsic value of every living being:

- Premise 1: God exists and what God has created has intrinsic value.
- Premise 2: God has created the living beings.
- Conclusion: Every living being has intrinsic value.

If a person argues on the basis of a kind of personal life philosophy, it does not imply that this person pretends that his or her basic or "fundamental" views are absolutely certain and authoritative. On the contrary. In surveys we find that people are inclined to respect the basic views of others. They are willing to stand up courageously for some views, and they do it on a basis which in part is a value hierarchy. And that implies going deep from the point of view of premise/conclusion relations. But deepness does not imply absolutism and dogmatism. There is a tendency among some of those who favor a "postmodern"

terminology to associate deepness of argumentation with "fundamentalism" in an odious sense. This is unfortunate. Today and tomorrow we shall have, I hope, people who have a life philosophy, a strong sense of value priorities.

Supporters of the deep ecology movement are activists within the general ecological movement who go deep in their argumentation patterns. The term "total pattern" is important because going deep in the defined way is completely compatible with a fairly narrow, very pragmatic attitude in specific environmental conflicts and with argument in 90

It is remarkable that Lewis can on the one hand continue to look at what he calls the "dominant" school of radical environmentalism as a contributor to the likelihood of ecological holocaust (p. 26), *and* on the other holds that what the school believes in will "vanish quickly in the light of empirical scrutiny." It seems to me that this very quickness and combined with Western respect for empirical findings should make it possible for moderates to go ahead, come together, and start the necessary radical changes in spite of the existence of radical environmentalism. There is no good reason to wait because some people talk ("tout") about the wicked West, the virtuous East, the evil industrials and the peaceful primitives. Don't be distracted by my "rationalist epistemology and reductionistic mode of analysis." Hegel, Bergson and Whitehead inspire more people than Spinoza does. "Unfortunately, the emergence of the social consensus needed to effect change appears unlikely." (p. 25). I agree, but as activists we have the duty to try to realize the unlikely. I think we agree about that also. But hopefully we shall disagree about many philosophical and religious issues, including those which fascinate Spinoza.

Note:

1Robyn Eckersley: *Environmentalism and Political Theory. Towards an Eco-centric Approach*, SUNY Press, Albany, N.Y., 1992.

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