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THE CONFLICT OF IDEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

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In recent years there has been a concentrated effort in many disciplines to locate those ideas and sentiments in history which underlay the exploitation and destruction of ecosystems. This widespread riffling of the documents and institutions upon which modern presuppositions about the relationship of man and nature are founded was preceeded by a less introspective explanation based on the "gospel of efficiency," a creed espoused by the early conservationists which postulated the origin of the difficulty in poor laws, bad management, inadequate planning and wasteful habits. It was a view that all the major institutions of government and business were comfortable with, predicated on the controlled expansion of an economy geared to evermore efficient conversion of ecosystems and habitats into jobs and products. Indeed, in America, conservation was conservative, a rich-man's hobby and big foundation playground.

When doubts arose about these premises and it began to appear that deep weaknesses in the system and not simply the system's priorities were at fault, there was an academic scramble to open up the history of ideas, doctrines of theology, origins of esthetics, and the confines of "linear thought" so as to lay bare the root causes of our environmental dilemmas. Out of this rich lode came monographs on the theory and practice of the domination of nature, Greek and Roman hubris, the arrogance of patriarchal, pastoral civilizations

under whose feet the world was washing away, Judaic historicism and Christian other-worldliness, the mechanications of science and illusions of homocentrism. It was a big rock that scholarship turned over and many of its cryptic denizens hunched there have yet to be collected. It is apparent that, like ecosystems, the web of our perception of nature ramifies without end, pervading thought and value in all the arts and sciences. In all fields it has become possible, even somewhat fashionable, to attend to those components heretofore ignored.

One of the consequences of this new exploration is that C. P. Snow's widely heralded "two-cultures" version of the modern world breaks down. Science does not always compel a vision of nature different than that of the humanities. Both are strongholds of the hierarchic view of the world, mankind as the privileged species, and the subordination of the non-human for the benefit and exhaltation of people. Conversely, both contain minorities in which a more organic model and more humble philosophy prevail.

Another consequence is in the ways in which science influences the non-sciences, and it is one of these to which I wish to draw attention. It occurs as an aspect of the style of modern thought which, in effect, is detached and ostensibly non-judgmental, not so much noncommittal as an extension of the view that all ideas have their merits and should be heard. Nothing objectionable about it on the surface, but it is the strategy of the calculating intellect which enables the individual to deliberate on the assumption that he is restraining his personal preferences from matters of public discussion and is open to divergent views.

This cherished posture, in its modern form, is interconnected with the discovery of culture. That discovery occurred in the 20th century as the social sciences realized that the world's ethnic groups do not constitute evolutionary stages which culminate in Western Europe, but are in fact equally valid ways of life. It is not this premise itself which is at issue but a corollary flowing from it, that appraisals must be withheld about the practices of other people because such valuing is biased and culture-bound. Carried one step further, this view is that, even within a single society, no absolute values are possible. As academics we live in a world dominated by the fallout from this relativism which flourishes in a multinational, political environment but which castrates the educational process by depriving it of any commitment except to its own unfliching pliancy.

Oddly enough, it is a style inextricably connected to the myth of ideology. Nothing might seem further from the militant assertion of one's own beliefs than the determined flaccidy of commitment which I have described. But the myth of ideology is that the human animal is engaged in a lifelong process of choosing sides, mobilizing conviction in dialectics, collating opinions, dipping in and out of beliefs and disbeliefs and in short creating a concept of the self in terms of selective preference. To that end the academics and intellectuals see themselves as the agents of internal and external dialogues, committed only to the ideal of identity by belief and will.

Although one is identified with a "position" in such a culture, its actual basis is incipient abandonment of positions. The individual

articulates a thesis of identity the way a lawyer takes a case, as though it were detachable: one may take the opposite side tomorrow from a hotly-defended position today. The myth holds all those elements constituting the self or group as equally detachable: politics, social role, "life-style", gender, and relationships in a wider ecological context. But the ease of detachment is merely a supposition, and it is quite possible that we are not that kind of animal at all. If so, attempts to change ecological relationships may be very different in consequences than detachment from a legal position. The kinds of damage that are possible in exercising this philosophy of casual disengagement have not been much studied.

Today every field of the study of mankind is deeply committed to environmental relativism. Even the concept of "environmentalism" has become a psychological doctrine denying inherent constraints on the human organism. Geography, with its blasé endorsement of economic determinism; history, our study of the "rise" of civilization on a Promethean theme; the arts, which have separated abstract qualities from content; anthropology and sociology, with their social process and ethnological cataloguing on the theme of "everything's possible," and the natural sciences, with their posture of value-free fact-finding; all seem to confirm that "man makes himself" no matter how the world is made.

I am fully aware of the crippling effect on thought of the unwillingness to consider alternatives or the indulgence of whim and emotion. Turning the mind over to the arbitrary acts of irrational behavior and rationalizing mindlessness would be to surrender qualities

which are precious, rare and hard-won. Tyranny lies in that direction. And yet, we are engaged in a world-wide devastation of ecosystems and other species on the grounds that people are related to the natural world only by "paradigms," "models," "schemata," or other constructs which are at best variations on archetypes and at worst fickle opinions shared by a group. Thus the biological concept of evolution is seen not as a scientific formulation of the integrative processes of nature but as one more construct in a marketplace of ideas. Myths are viewed in a framework of comparative mythology, prose as comparative literature. Any and all aspects of human life assume this mantle of footless disposition - the human population, the existence of other species, the use of soils, forests and waters, the manipulation of watersheds, the regulation of energy and nutrient systems, the fate of public lands and public air.

Each of these becomes in this mode of thought a bundle of "issues" in which coalitions of political power rise and fall, working out their compromises on the shared assumption that the world has no inherent structure, no given, but only an order projected upon it which makes it seem coherent. One chooses ecological relationships the way one chooses a political party or chooses brands of groceries.

As unrealistic as this attitude may seem it is the position of modern scholarship. It is the intellectual manifestation of the Faustian premise of human destiny by the assertion of will and the domination of nature - stoutly defended on the grounds that 1) man <u>is</u> a special case and therefore free to make a world according to his desires, and 2) that the notion of "determinism" (taken to mean

any constraint by the non-human) is a cold hand on imagination, creativity, or the human spirit, and is inevitably abused to justify injustice.

On the grounds that one culture is intrinsically no better than another we are therefore expected to accept, for instance, that goat-pastoralism is no worse than any other land use, and that it cannot, in fact, be judged by members of outside cultures. Consequently we have created a free-association fantasy-land for every area of thought touching on either the "cradle" lands of civilization in the Middle East, or on the present "Third World." Back-to-the-land movements, bearing ecological banners and celebrating simplified "life styles" are widely adopting the goat on the misapprehension that all the attributes of pre-industrial agriculture are ideological.

Because it has given the world a 5000 year lesson in environmental catastrophe, one might expect that goat-keeping and its effects would represent a generally understood and accepted principle. But the goat remains immune. It is sanctioned on government lands, given as foreign aid, praised by peace corps and missionaries, idealized by literary enthusiasts for classical allusions, defended by geographers, and cuddled by sub-culture groups who refuse to accept that any animal so cute and sociable is not a friend to man.

This is but one example in the whole realm of man-nature relationships. Lacking a true cultus to undergird our thought and discussion, we have instead a cult of relativity with its glaze of humane affirmation of brotherhood, the unwillingness to commit beyond dialectics on the grounds that personal choice and cultural context are the only

absolutes. Fearful of appearing provincial or prejudiced, the intellectual style holds only to the right of equivocation.

The observation that a society based on cultural relativism inexorably extends its withdrawal of judgment and appraisal to all of its areas of interest, including the relationship of man to nature, precipitates us into a serious double bind. How can we divest ourselves of that autotelic posture which says in effect that there is no evolutionary context of human life, no inherent constraints on our freedom to do as we please in the natural world, throw off that hubris in which the world is viewed as inert stuff for our manipulation and still retain our tolerance for the views of other peoples? If peace in the world is to be based on mutual respect, a willingness to live in a world of many races and many customs, how can we avoid the accommodative attitude which I have just been critisizing? How can we be at once committed and yet affirm the diversity of peoples?

In short, the advocacy of an absolute sense of human ecology and a relativistic one of human cultures seems contradictory. But I think it need not be. The conservationists have held that the attribution of things as resources was primarily a cultural designation, and that may be so, but the reality of ecosystems and biomes, the interdependent community of species, the roles of soil and sea as the matrix of life are not cultural concepts. They are previous to cultures. It may indeed be chauvinistic for one people to ridicule an alien notion that, for instance, the mistletoe, a shrubby parasite, is spiritually potent, but the extermination of whales or pollution of the stratosphere is another matter.

What is the difference? How can we forebear on the grounds of universal brotherhood and local customs on the one hand and be adamant about natural systems on the other? Within the context of modern existential relativism, there is no resolution of this dilemma. To those who accept all things on the grounds of the privilege of personal or cultural conviction, for whom reality is created wholly anew with each perceiving agent, and alike for those committed to the homocentric destiny in which mankind transcends the usual order of nature, the contradiction can only be resolved by the assertion that all such actions carry the rights of tribal hegemony. Carried to its logical end in a democracy of individualism, everyone's private vision is as valid as every other; indeed, this is precisely where academic, intellectualist thought has brought us.

If ecological thought - that is, natural philosophy or ecosophy - is seen as part of that neutral matrix to be shaped according to the circumstances and impulses of each tradition then there can be no prior understanding. It means, in effect, that there is no such thing as the human species, except as a kind of transmitter or container for fluid thought. It follows that there are no other species either, since, like us, they cannot be studied <u>as a species</u>, but only as specific and particular instances. The parable of the blind men and the elephant becomes appropriate in a strange way: reality depends on your perspective and the occasion, therefore there is no elephant, only a word by which different individuals, groups, cultures refer to a kind of experience.

Geographer David Lowenthal asserted that the American concern

for wilderness had nothing to do with insight into the foundations of our existence but was only a matter of taste - and rather poor taste at that. "The bison," he wrote, "is not a great shaggy beast. It is only a congeries of feelings."

The poor bison! It does not exist except in the multifold ways that different cultures choose to see it. In the same spirit, the typical trick for impressing freshmen in introductory psychology is to suggest that the tree falling on an island where there are no people makes no sound.

Thus things cannot have an enduring relationship with their environment if their reality depends on the contingent mind. Art, in this view has no cummunicative function except by ideosyncratic chance. This capriciousness, or "the cult of eccentric originality" as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, calls it, is shared by the artists themselves, as when la Corbusier or Soleri build cities or buildings unrelated to the surroundings. History itself is often seen as a collage of such extraneous acts, a transcendent creativity answering only to seemingly illogical whim.

Because the central question concerning the relationship of man to nature is the nature of nature, that is, of the Other, its reciprocal aspect is the nature of the self. All concepts of the natural thus turn on the definition of man. If man is indeed a member of ecosystems and not their god then his evolution should illuminate his membership, and we would expect paleo-anthropology to interpret the fossil human record accordingly. A small group of

anthropologists have indeed fostered our understanding of the genus Homo as an evolving, biological species. The mainstream of anthropology, however, clings tenaceously to the dazzle of comparative ethnology, the striving for cultural analysis pioneered by Boas and given brilliant recent articulation by Clifford Geertz, who says that since human behavior is only manifest in a particular culture that the underlying species-specific behaviors are not only unavailable but virtually non-existent. Thus has anthropology, like the other social sciences, surrendered its opportunities to define what it means to be human except by intra-species comparisons; that is, by human difference. Man may indeed have food habits, they seem to say, but all we can study are his knives, forks and spoons.

In this way a field with the brightest possibilities for defining human ecology yielded to the dialectics of ideology and the ideology of dialectics. Ideology, the master myth of our time, is the cloak of reasoned partisanship in a world where there are allowed only internally logically options. Within the frame of competing world religions (or what Gary Snyder has called "the cosmopolitan religions"), isms, ologies, parties, sects, and a dime-store counter of psychological trinket-theories of the self we seem to have settled for the deep premise that the only environment is a kind of ambience or closet from which we choose today's reality-costume.

The modern imagination, as Louis Halle has said, is ideological. Thought is so grossly confused with consciousness that a prominent psychologist can write on the "origin of consciousness" as an existential dilemma occurring in historical times, a view woefully

deficient in what Robert Ardrey terms the sense of "four-dimensional man."

It has been widely observed that, since about the time of Francis Bacon, the West abandoned its preoccupation with paradise past and fixed its attention on future utopias, to be created by the reign of politician-scientists. Having turned our back on the past as the primal element in our identity, we entered a wonderland of possibilities. Liberated from 1,500 years of desultory regret and lament for the lost Eden, the energies of hope and optimism sprang up in the name of Progress. It is not surprising that Darwin's theory of evolution has had so little impact on the modern consciousness. The Church may have fought it, but to the secular mind the image of aeons of proto-human bestiality was no more attractive than a world degenerating since Adam. Only in one respect was Darwin preferable: he seemed to support the theory of Progress, though of course evolution has nothing whatever to do with that concept.

That abuse of Darwinian thought may prove in the long run to be more destructive than social Darwinism. From the confusion of progress and evolution we derive the corollaries of the normalcy (perpetual of) change and the idea of adaptability. Shorn of their time perspectives these aspects of evolution appear to justify change for its own sake, unlimited human flexibility, and therefore the commercial exploitation of our adolescent side in its relentless restructuring, the permutation of things and brands as novelty, and the curiously intolerant pursuit of fashion.

Further, there is a reintrojection of the ideal of transient forms and values into evolutionary settings, so that it can be argued

with solemn authority that for man biological evolution has ended and its place taken by "cultural evolution." The ideological, stratigraphic mind leaped to this marvelous discovery that social change, transmitted by learned information, has supplanted an objectionable biological process dependent on (the much too slow) genetic transmission.

It was just what society needed to disengage itself from the unsavory determinism of Darwin's thought without having to disprove it. It enabled the humanist, intellectual, artist, or social scientist to go his autotelic way, untroubled by the deep past, his animal self, or rules that seemed given rather than made.

Today in the face of the evolutionary studies of culture, the intellectual dimensions of "primitive" thought, the profound biological adaptations to and through which culture is possible, and research on primates, that biological/cultural dichotomy cannot be articulated with a straight face. But society in general lags far behind. The misconception of social "evolution" replacing biological evolution will take many years to fade. The bogus homology of social customs or cultural forms and evolutionary adaptation remains a general feature of the modern intellect. In its own idiom this relativistic monism turns even our humanity and our ecological connections into an ideological choice.

Thus it can be argued that all views on the use of nature are in their way valid, or that all are at least legitimate claims in a democratic society. So, decisions will be made on the basis of

"interest group" powers. "Environmental mediation" becomes the latest profession to spin off. A key phrase is "trade-offs." Economically we have become environmentally hip: we now know we must internalize environmental costs. Thus do we assimilate nature as one more variable.

There remains in the game no givens. The intractable nature of biogeochemical cycles and the requirements of the soil are but temporary obstacles in a world where every element of the ecosystem or of the biosphere, like every man, is regarded as having his price. Such an approach is not confined to a blatently homocentric view of humanity, nor is it merely the spoilers view (the real-estaters and building industries). It is the prevailing mode in those governmental agencies and educational institutions which hire and train the professionals who deal with "land use": agronomists, hydrologists, foresters, and so on.

One could interpret Aldo Leopold's concept, the "ecological conscience," as social expediency: the obligation to conscientiously hear all claims to the control of the natural earth system. But that is not what Leopold meant. In effect, Leopold was rejecting the tenets of his own professionalism. In the preface to his book, A Sand County Almanac, he admitted to being one "who cannot live without wild things." Thus he seems at first merely eccentric, but in the end the reader is compelled to ask the same question of himself. To those who are assured that the Big Questions of our time have to do with Peace, Race, Poverty, Economics, and Politics, the question may seem frivolous.

But the wild, taken to mean the whole community of species, is the prior question. In fact, it is not a question at all, for there is no alternative to living with wild things, only a world increasingly shaped after the desert regions of the Near and Middle East, where political wrangling and endless marauding are the tattered epilogues to a world goated to death, where people play out their roles like regressed primates, obsessed with the details of the social contract, the final inheritors of five millennia of ideological absolutism and ecological relativism..

It is not my intention, however, to enter into an ideological style in critisizing it: to argue a position and advocate that we relinquish one attitude for another. It seems unlikely to me that one can solve the dilemma by participating in its skirmishes. To insist that we adopt the view that our problems stem from the inconsistency of our views goes nowhere. I would suggest rather that the incapacity of the modern mind to find permanent environmental attachments is a consequence of defective ontogenesis.

The processes of establishing relationships vary enormously over the life span. The relativistic position is both a symptom and preoccupation with adult alienation. It neglects the identify-forming stages of early growth of which it is the defective outcome. Convinced that relatedness to the non-human as well as to others is made by the calculating consciousness of the adult, we have abused the needs of the child. Those needs and processes, given the opportunity, lead to a stable concept of selfhood which embraces the earth as firmly as it does the mother.

I cannot here elaborate on these processes which have been explored recently by Erik Erikson, Harold Searles, James Fernandez, Edith Cobb and others, but only remark that if the existential dilemmas of chronic relativism are indeed symptoms of inadequate nurturing then we have much reason to hope. For the child is predisposed to enter into the cultus in ways that are irreversible and subsequently undeniable. The total wisdom of humanity may not thereby be increased; its ecological effects will depend on just what the particular vision is. But the development of a mature identity inevitably reaches out to all things, to the growth of an organic relationship in thought as well as fact. In contrast, identity based on arbitrary and transient accretions to the selfhood is a kind of endless smorgasbord in which mature nausea follows adolescent appetite.