

Marcuse, Liberation, and Radical Ecology

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Herbert Marcuse's late 1970s essay "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society," written shortly before his death in 1979 and published here for the first time, articulates his vision of liberation and sense of the importance of ecology for the radical project. The essay argues that genuine ecology requires a transformation of human nature, as well as the preservation and protection of external nature from capitalist and state communist pollution and destruction. Rooting his vision of human liberation in the Frankfurt School notion of the embeddedness of human beings in nature, Marcuse believed that until aggression and violence within human beings was diminished, there would necessarily be continued destruction of nature, as well as violence against other human beings. Consequently, Marcuse stressed the importance of radical psychology and transforming inner nature, both to preserve external nature and to diminish violence in society.

Marcuse's ecological vision is rooted in his reflections on the early Marx. The author of one of the first reviews of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marcuse rooted his philosophy in the early Marx's philosophical naturalism and humanism.[1] In Marx's anthropology, taken up and developed by Marcuse, the human being was a natural being, part and parcel of nature. Capitalism, on this view, produced an alienation of human beings by alienating individuals from many-sided activity by forcing upon them a specialized and one-sided capitalist division of labor. Under capitalism, life is organized around labor, around the production of commodities for private profit, and individuals are forced to engage in external, coercive, and one-sided activity. For Marx, by contrast, humans are many-sided human beings with a wealth of needs and potentialities which are suppressed under capitalism. The human being is both an individual and social being for Marx and capitalism neither allows for the full development of individuality, nor for the possibility of diverse, social and cooperative relationships. Instead, it promotes greed, competition, and asocial behavior.

Marcuse followed this early Marxian critique of capitalism throughout his life, focusing analysis on how contemporary capitalism produced false needs and repressed both individuality and sociality. He also followed the early Marx's concept of human beings as desiring beings, conceptualizing desire as part of nature, exemplified both in erotic desire for other human beings and instinctive needs for freedom and happiness. During the late 1940s and 1950s, Marcuse radicalized his anthropology, incorporating the Freudian instinct theory into his Marxist view of human nature, producing a version of Freudo-Marxism that he stuck with until the end, as is evident in "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society" which uses the Freudian instinct theory to criticize contemporary forms of destruction of the environment.

Marcuse sympathized, though not uncritically, with the environmental movement since the early 1970s. In a symposium on "Ecology and Revolution" in Paris in 1972, some of which was translated in the September 1972 issue of *Liberation*, Marcuse argued that the most militant groups of the period were fighting "against the war crimes being committed against the

Vietnamese people" (p. 10). Yet he saw ecology as an important component of that struggle, arguing that "the violation of the earth is a vital aspect of the counterrevolution" (ibid). For Marcuse, the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was waging "ecocide" against the environment, as well as genocide against the people: "It is no longer enough to do away with people living now; life must also be denied to those who aren't even born yet by burning and poisoning the earth, defoliating the forests, blowing up the dikes. This bloody insanity will not alter the ultimate course of the war but it is a very clear expression of where contemporary capitalism is at: the cruel waste of productive resources in the imperialist homeland goes hand in hand with the cruel waste of destructive forces and consumption of commodities of death manufactured by the war industry" (ibid).

In his major writings, Marcuse consistently followed the Frankfurt school emphasis on reconciliation with nature as an important component of human liberation, and also stressed the importance of peace and harmony among human beings as the goal of an emancipated society.[2] Marcuse consistently called for a new concept of socialism that made peace, joy, happiness, freedom, and oneness with nature a primary component of an alternative society. Producing new institutions, social relations, and culture would make possible, in his liberatory vision, the sort of non-alienated labor, erotic relations, and harmonious community envisaged by Fourier and the utopian socialists. A radical ecology, then, which relentlessly criticized environmental destruction, as well as the destruction of humans being, and that struggled for a society without violence, destruction, and pollution was part of Marcuse's vision of liberation.

The late 1970s essay on ecology, published here, was presented in California to a wilderness class. Marcuse sarcastically opens by stating that there may no longer be a problem of preserving the wilderness, as President Carter had turned over some thirty-six million acres of wilderness land to commercial development. This trend accelerated tremendously during the Reagan era, in which his Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, wanted to turn over all government lands and wilderness preserves to commercial development. Had Marcuse lived through the Reagan era, we would no doubt have benefitted from some radical Marcusean critiques of this monstrous epoch, and all of those who are contributing to this discussion have engaged in such critique, inspired by the Marcusean vision.

There was, for Marcuse, a contradiction between capitalist productivity and nature, for in its quest for higher profits and the domination of nature, capitalism inevitably destroyed nature. Capitalist production manifested an unleashing of aggressive and destructive energies which destroyed life and polluted nature. In this process, human beings are transformed into tools of labor and become instruments of destruction. Introjecting capitalism's aggressive, competitive, and destructive impulses, individuals themselves engage in ever more virulent destruction of the natural environment and anything (individuals, communities, and nations) which stand in the way of its productive exploitation of resources people, and markets.

The relevance of Marcuse's argument should be apparent in the aftermath of the ecocide and genocide of the Persian Gulf war. While ecologists warned from the beginning of the disastrous environmental effects of a Gulf war, establishment scientists claimed that potential oil spills and fires did not threaten more than regional destruction (see the report buried in the business section of the *New York Times* on January 16, the day the war erupted). Evidently Bush and his War

Lords allowed no environmental restraints on their high-tech massacre of the Iraqis and destruction of the fragile Gulf region environment. In late January, Bush signed an order allowing the military to be free of the burden of producing environmental-impact reports on the consequences of their action, which was required after awareness of the environmental effects of the Vietnam war. Henceforth, free of all restrictions, the Bush/Schwarzkopf war machine merrily bombed Iraqi nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons facilities, and attempted to destroy Iraq's oil industry, causing severe fires throughout Iraq; the environmental damage caused by the U.S.-led coalition bombing was so severe that the Bush administration directed all federal agencies not to reveal to the public any information concerning environmental damage. The U.S. would release no satellite photos of the region and refused to disclose the effects of U.S.-led coalition bombing on the region (see the article by John Hoagan in the May 1991 *Scientific American*).[3]

Thus both the Iraqis and U.S. forces were responsible for environmental terrorism and both sides committed horrific acts of human and environmental destruction. Indeed, war itself in the high-tech age is environmental terrorism and ecocide as advanced technology destroys the earth and annihilates human beings. From this perspective, the high-tech massacre in the Gulf region reveals the insanity of the Western project of the domination of nature, in which a military machine sees the economic and military infrastructure and people of Iraq as objects to dominate and even destroy. The human and ecological holocaust discloses the importance of Marcuse's argument that individuals must change their very sensibilities and instinctual structure so that they can no longer commit or tolerate such atrocities against nature and other human beings. We must work to produce a society in which individuals refuse to commit such wanton acts of aggression and in which the general population refuses to tolerate such crimes. The euphoria in destruction and wide-spread support of U.S. gulf war crimes in the general population shows the extent of societal regression during the conservative hegemony of the last years and the need for re-education and humanization of the population. "Postmodern" cynicism and nihilism will not help us deal with such problems and thus we must return to the classical thinkers of the emancipatory tradition to guide us in the struggles ahead and out of the long night of darkness in the era of Reagan and Bush.

Notes

1. See Marcuse's "The Foundations of Historical Materialism," in *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), originally published in 1932. I discuss this essay and other elements of Marcuse's theory in *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (London and Berkeley: Macmillan Press and University of California Press, 1984).

2. On the Frankfurt school, see my book *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* (London and Baltimore: Polity and Johns Hopkins Press, 1989).

3. Eventually, the Saudis admitted that coalition bombing produced at least 30% of the oil spills and over fifty of the fires. See my forthcoming book, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1992) for exposes of the propaganda and disinformation campaigns whereby the Bush administration mobilized consent to its high-tech massacre and covered over its crimes through propaganda and lies.