For ecology panel at Venice Conference

The Radicalization of Nature

~~by Murray Bookchin~~ *

L'ecologia sociale radicale

Radical social ecology tries to achieve a drastic breakthrough in the opaque veil of dualisms and metaphysics that separates humanity from nature: it tries to "radicalize" nature, or more precisely our basic conceptions of the natural world.

It pointedly challenges the western tradition of nature to which we are the uneasy heirs. For more than two millenia, western society has almost consistently advanced an image of the natural world that is harshly reactionary. Nature in this imagery is "blind," "mute," "cruel," and "stingy," or to use Marx's unhappy expression, a "realm of necessity" that incessantly opposes man's zealous striving for self-realization and freedom. Here, man confronts a hostile "otherness" that acts upon him with an oppressive compulsion against which he must oppose his own powers of toil and guile. History takes the form of a Promethean drama in which man heroically defies and willfully asserts himself against a brutally hostile natural world.

It is from this tradition of bitter conflict between man and nature that economics was to define itself as the study of "scarce resources" versus "unlimited needs"; psychology as a discipline for controlling humanity's unruly "internal nature" through rationality and the imperatives of "civilization"; social theory as the account of man's ascent from "brutish animality" into the glowing light of culture and reason. All class theories of social development have been rooted for nearly two centuries in the belief that the "domination of ~~nature~~ man by man" em-

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erges from the need to "dominate nature" as a precondition for the emancipation of humanity as a whole. This vision of history, already evident in Aristotle's political writings, was to acquire the status of a "socialist science" in the hands of Marx and provides an insidious justification for hierarchy and domination in the name of equality and liberation. Ultimately, the real opponent in the doxography of socialist theory is not capitalism but nature -- the "slime of history," to use Sartre's juicy phrase, that clings to humanity like muck from the bestial underworld of mindless "natural necessity."

By contrast, radical social ecology advances a fundamentally different view of nature and natural evolution. Contrary to the traditional image of nature as "mute," "cruel," "stingy," and "necessitarian," the natural world is seen more roundedly as creative, mutualistic, fecund, and the grounding for an ethics of freedom. Seen from this standpoint, biological relationships are marked less significantly by the "rivalries" and "competitive" attributes imputed to them by Darwinian orthodoxy than by the mutualistic attributes emphasized by a growing number of contemporary ecologists -- an image pioneered by Peter Kropotkin who rarely receives the credit he deserves in the literature. Indeed, radical social ecology challenges the very premises of "fitness" that enter so crucially into the Darwinian drama of evolutionary survival. As William Trager has emphasized in his insightful work on symbiosis: "The conflict in nature between different kinds of organisms has been popularly expressed in phrases like 'struggle for existence' and the 'survival of the fittest.' Yet few people realize that mutual cooperation between different organisms -- symbiosis -- is just as important, and that the 'fittest' may be

the one that most helps another to survive."

This pithy and highly illuminating judgement may have an even wider reach than Trager suspects. That it is relevent to our very definition of an ecosystem is obvious: the nexus of mutualistic relationships between species -- plant and animal, overtly complementary symbionts, even prey and predator -- form the very geometry of an ecological community. As our studies of food webs indicate, the complexity of these relationships, their diversity and intricacy, is a crucial determinant of an ecosystem's stability. In contrast to biotically complex temperate zones, our relatively simple desert and arctic ecosystems are extremely fragile and break down easily with the loss or numerical decline of only a few species. The thrust of biotic evolution over great eras of organic development has been the increasing diversification of species and their interlocking into highly complex, basically mutualistic relationships without which the widespread colonization of the plant by life would have been a very unlikely possibility. Unity in diversity is a determinant not only of the stability of an ecological community; it a source of its fecundity, of its evolutionary potential to create still more complex life-forms and biotic interrelationships, even in the most inhospitable areas of the planet. Community -- the ecological community or ecosystem -- lies at the heart of an authentic notion of organic evolution as such.

But there is a sense in which community, conceived as a mutualistic ecosystem, radically illuminates the concept of organic evolution in a way that renders conventional notions of evolution unsatisfactory as they now stand. Evolutionary theory from Darwin's day to ours suffers from the highly atomistic outlook that has

marked Anglo-American thought from the earliest days of its empiricist legacy in John Locke's work. Locke's theory of experience, so influential in the English-speaking world during the three centuries after his death, structures sensation around "simple ideas," the information-bits of color, density, odor, auditory stimuli, and the like that our sensorium receives and inscribes on the "blank sheet" or tabula rasa of the mind. Mind, to be sure, compounds these sensory atoms into complex ideas that renders them open to abstraction, comparison, and contemplation. Reality, however, consists of ultimate facts, of irreducible and discrete components which the word "data" with its origins in the "brute" factivity of the datum signifies as the epistemological bedrock and ultimate constituent of experience.

This atomization of reality, a product in many respects of the free-wheeling ego whose sovereignty and independence in the marketplace lies at the core of Anglo-American political theory, permeates our notion of organic evolution as well. The ultimate fact of evolutionary theory is the species, with all the specificity and isolation that the word itself implies. Evolution traces the "origins," changes, fortunes, and destiny of this theoretical and monadic isolate. We are only too familiar, for example, with the evolution of Eohippus, the small four-toed mammal of the Eocene into the modern horse of the late Pleistocene, notably its surviving E przewalskii in Asia. Pictoral accounts of this example of intraspecific development form the standard fare of our elementary texts on evolution.

But does such a strand-like narrative, focused so monadically on the "origin of species" and their evolution, exhaust the reality of organic evolution? Does this transmutation of Lockean "simple ideas" into single strands of "simple species," mechanically

bunched together in the clenched fist of the biologist, give us the most seminal explanation of evolution as a truly organic, not merely mechanistic, image of evolution with its wealth of contextual change, succession, and elaboration? I think not -- for there is more that "evolves" in organic evolution than a collection of intraspecific strands, each autonomously unfolding on its own through a selective interaction of "rivals" and "abiotic" "forces" that filter out the "fit" from the "unfit."

What we lack in the "origin of species" is a contextual conception of animal and plant evolution, one that goes beyond the naive idea of "origins" as a sudden leap of species into existence. Evolution in its most profound sense is the story of ecosystem development, not only the development of a single or several species in all their Lockean singularity and isolation. The image of Eohippus, viewed as the "ascent" of the hoofed horse from a small four-toed mammal, is turned into a fiction when all the biota and the ecosystem they comprise is removed from the evolutionary account. The species evolved as part of the evolution of an ecological community, that is, correlatively with the ecological relationships that gave it meaning and definition in evolutionary development as a whole. At every step in its evolution, Eohippus was more than a species; it held a very complex citizenship within a biotic community which was developing as a totality. Without changing with that community and sharing its common evolutionary destiny, Eohippus would have been extinguished like so many other species that fell by the wayside.

The concept of co-evolution, notably, the cojoined and interactive evolution of symbiotically related species (including humanity), goes a long way toward recognizing interspecific embeddedness in a shared, evolving community. But more should be added to

this very fruitful and stimulating notion. Not only do species evolve cojointly and symbiotically with each other: the ecosystem as a whole evolves in mutual synchronicity with the species that comprise it and plays the broad role of a whole in relationship to its parts. More precisely, it is not only cojoint species development that gives us an authentic image of evolutionary change, but also the structure, texture, and complexity of the relationships between species that must be included in a contextual outlook. The "geometry" of evolving ecosystems toward ever-greater complexity must be clearly brought to the forefront of the evolutionary picture if we are to understand species development in a meaningful way. Evolutionary development, in effect, is structural development as well as species development with their co-evolutionary affiliations. If the conventional description of biotic evolution sees the "origin of species" as the appearance and development of life-forms from, say, four-toed to hoofed descendents, the concept of eco-evolution (to coin a word whose existence has long been needed) greatly expands this description and provides it with a provocative sense of meaning.

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Here, meaning stems from the evolutionary thrust of ecosystems toward ever-greater diversity and complexity -- but not only as a function of stability. There is an almost metaphysical sense in which greater diversity and complexity has its social analogue in our modern conceptions of freedom. Freedom in its most nascent form is already present in the self-directiveness of life as such, specifically in an organism's active effort to be itself and resist any external forces that vitiate its identity. Within this self-

guiding process of motility and irritability lie the germinal forms of sensory perception, the evolution of a nervous system, rudimentary subjectivity, and the intellectuation that yields thought, consciousness, and self-reflective will. Not that humanity marks the apex and terminus of the evolution of will. Such an anthropomorphic conceit denies the hidden autonomy of the cell which explodes within multicellular organisms in the form of cancer, the "wisdom of the body" (to use Walter Cannon's phrase) that tells us of our "ease" and "dis-ease," and the unspoken language of feeling that reminds us of our membership in the entire community of life. Whether it be physico-chemical, neurological, or humanly cerebral, choice is always present in the organic if only as a result of the metabolic activity of self-maintenance -- a crucial attribute of life. So conceived, every organism is in some sense "willful," just as it is "selective" in meeting its needs and "purposive" in perpetuating its well-being. However dimly, it transmutes the essential attribute of self-maintenance that earns it the status of a life-form into a capacity to choose between alternatives that favor its survival -- not merely to react to stimuli as a purely physico-chemical ensemble.

This dim germinal freedom is heightened by the growing wealth of ecological complexity that confronts evolving life in synchronicity with evolving ecosystems. The elaboration of possibilities that comes with the elaboration of diversity and the growing multitude of alternatives confronting species evolution opens newer and more stimulating pathways for organic development. Life is not passive in the face of these possibilities for its evolution; it drives toward them actively in a shared process of mutual stimulation as surely as it actively creates and colonizes the niches

that cradle a vast diversity of life-forms in our richly elaborated biosphere. This imagery of active, indeed striving life requires no mystical Hegelian "Spirit" or Heraklitean Logos to explain it. Activity and striving are presupposed in our very definition of metabolism, in the fact that metabolic activity is co-extensive with the notion of activity as such and imparts an identity, indeed, a rudimentary "self" to an organism. Diversity and complexity superadd the dimension of variegated alternatives and pathways to the simple fact of choice -- and, with choice, the rudimentary fact of freedom. For freedom is meaningful only insofar as choices exist to be made unimpairedly and agents are not restricted from creating and pursuing them.

So conceived, freedom in its most germinal form is also a function of diversity and complexity, of a "realm of necessity" that is pushed back and contracted by a growing and expanding multitude of alternatives to the tyranny of the word, "must." Compulsion withers under the hot glare of opportunity and the increasingly variegated possibilities that come with diversity. For freedom is nothing if it is not pluralistic in the horizons it presents to life, indeed, if it is not a plurality of directions for development. There is a certain sense in which every species is accountable to itself for its own development -- or its extinction. While the inevitable can descend upon us catastrophically in the form of ~~the~~ accidental and external agents, as current theories of Mesozoic die-offs from asteroids suggest, the fact remains that a species may contribute to its own development or decline by the way it "chooses" to evolve in the very broad sense that I have used the word "choice," which is to say, the pathways its own ecological context opens to it and the ex-

tent to which it participates in following one as distinguished from another. Evolution is not "blind" or "mute," and its past is always part of its present as the existence, indeed, crucial importance of such primal biota as blue-green algae attests. With increasing diversity and complexity, life forms become more "willful" in the sense that there is not only more to choose and there is more "choosing" that is done, but the word "must" as an expression of compulsion becomes less compelling and life's activity and "willfulness" -- its nisus, to use a philosophically honorable Latin term -- is correspondingly heightened.

Anthropocentricity, here, consists not in reading words like "will," "choice," and "freedom" back into a natural world that seems beyond the reach of this terminology, but rather in projecting its uniquely human meaning into the presumably "dumb" biota that surround us. We are rapidly losing the ability to work with gradations of thought or with a language that is conditioned by the dialectics of continuity. Everyday life and the binary number of cybernetics tempts us to abbreviate meanings, to attenuate the shadings and subtleties that exist in the flux of reality. Hence we increasingly speak of "change" instead of "grpwth" as though mechanical kinesis and energetics are valid substitutes for organic evolution -- whether of ourselves or the surrounding world. Bad habits foreclose reality to us and derail us from the paths to insight and nuance. This barbarization of the human "self," with its denial of a selfhood and subjectivity that is extrahuman, takes its toll in our ability to concommitantly distinguish and unite gradations of a development into a coherent continuum. We are becoming habitually reductionist and simplistic in our "either . . .

or" mentality of segregated categorization -- a reflection of the savage fragmentation that marks the modern world.

Rudimentary "will," "choice," and "freedom" are certainly not human "will," "choice," and "freedom." Paired against each other, they are separated by humanity's ability to symbolize, verbalize, institutionalize relationships into what we call a "society" as distinguished from spontaneously formed biotic communities, and powers of work and cerebration that exist only in dim form in most animal species. But just as every gestating human embryo reminds us that our species does not originate full-grown in this world and history lies behind every beginning as well as end, so even "self," that precious diadem of the bourgeois boulevardier who parades his ego on the pavements of our great cities carries the "slime" of natural history on his shoes. Which is not to say that social concepts are reducible to natural categories -- merely, that they are evolutionary results, with germinal origins as steeped in the natural world as they are in the human. The "facts of life" are really processes and they are no more free of organicity than the human body is free of cells.

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Values, too, are no more free of organicity than the "facts of life." But the "slime," which caused Sartre to shudder with horror over the natural origins of society, forms the material for a diadem of its own. To Sartre, following the western tradition of a nature ruled by unrelenting law, organicity meant necessity -- a "stingy" nature, the "compulsion" of the body, the "meaningless" inevitability of death, the "imprisonment" of freedom to "necessity." I have argued elsewhere that it is precisely a fecund nature, today, that is dying under the compul-

sions of a savagely anti-ecological society.[*] Cartesianism

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[*] See my book, The Ecology of Freedom (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books; 1982) especially the "Epilogue."

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with its harsh mind-body dualisms is not confined to the French, but it afflicts them more deeply than others. Values conceived as strictly cerebral products cut across the need for objective roots. That is to say, they require validation by a tangible reality, not merely by a wayward and fickle "consensus" that assumes its most malignant form in the "public opinion poll" -- a crude kind of moral politics, based on media manipulation, that is the very denial of an independent public and a critical body politic. The fortunes of such abhorrent practices like capital punishment are testimony to the fact that State-managed murder, fostered by a democracy based on engineered consent, is no grounding for an ethics that has even a modicum of self-respect.

That human nature can make nature seem "blind," "mute," "cruel," and "stingy" is demonstrated by the way the fortunes of the natural world fare in the custody of the human mind. Marxism's "dialectical materialism" with its own blind concept of organic "lawfulness" that, extrapolated in society, gave Stalin and his ilk the warrant to commit atrocious crimes in the "higher interests" of history or Hitler's blood-and-soil ethos that brutally claimed many tens of millions of lives on battlefronts and in concentration camps -- all, should suffice to foster prudence, wariness, and distance toward any strictly naturalistic ethics. And

so it was to be in the first half of this century, when our most brilliant thinkers eschewed nature philosophy in any form as well as the ethical relativism of positivism. *

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* I think particularly of the famous Frankfurt School and especially its most outstanding writers, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, whose inability to root their concepts of reason and ethics in naturalism of some kind or a positivistic strategy of a purely personalistic morality, essentially accounts for the pessimism that marks their outlook in the latter periods of their lives. Even more importantly, of course, their pessimism was very existential. It resulted from the massive defeats society suffered as a consequence of the rise of Stalinism and fascism.

But nature philosophy, strictly speaking, is often marked by mythic archaisms at one extreme and mechanistic scientism at the other, and hence it should not be confused with eco-philosophy. Nature philosophy tends to emphasize moral compulsion, a "oneness" with the natural world that is cemented by a rigid commitment to the notion of "natural law" -- the harsh Ananke of the Greeks that weighs out with Dike the preordained destiny of life, whether as a dialectical telos or an ethical "penalty" for the "injustices" of Being. Ecophilosophy develops on the rich nutrients of freedom: the spontaneity, diversity, fecundity, ~~idiosyncracity~~ and creativity of nature, particularly in its ecosystem form. Traditional nature philosophy has nearly always been imperialistic: its gospel of totality places society and nature under the common imperium of the

"One" or the terminus of an "Absolute" toward which all strands of history grandly converge. Ecophilosophy has no closed, much less predetermined, end; it emphasizes a dialectic of gradations that bridges the phases of history but never rarifies them into an all-absorbing Spirit, deity, logos and all the "efficient causes" that have given rise to philosophical dualism. Its processual stance never neglects the distinctions within natural history that phase the inorganic into the organic, the biotic into the social, and the communal into the individual -- in short, the gradations that give rise to a richly articulated continuum rather than a grey and colorless continuity.

And it is from this image of a processual nature with its unifying concepts of creativity, mutualism, and a freedom spawned by the self-directiveness of life that the grounding for an objective ethics can be formulated. Which is not to say that nature is "ethical" in the human sense that it is consciously self-reflective or self-evaluative. Nature is neither "cruel" or "kind," "virtuous" or "evil, "gentle" or "harsh." Nor for that matter is it "hierarchical" or "egalitarian," "domineering" or "democratic," "exploitative" or "charitable." Such anthropomorphic readings of a natural ethos are romantic at best or place a mythic conception of nature in the service of totalitarian political ideologies at worst. We are already overburdened with the myth that nature has an "economy" which validates everything from laissez-faire to socialist planning with its respective ideologies of social Darwinism and dialectical materialism.

Indeed, strictly speaking, society is a human phenomenon, not a natural one. Human social life is constellation of clearly definable institutions for which there are no parallels in nature

-- monarchies, republics, democracies, law-making bodies, courts, police and military establishments, and the like, which differ from natural communities not only because of their seeming complexity but their marked intentionality. These institutions are products of human will, purposiveness, and the products of very distinct goals, the results of which are superadded to quasi-biological forms such as the human family and sex-related roles. If physical prowess or even mental acuteness (as Jane Goodall-Lawick would have us believe in her studies of chimpanzee "hierarchy") produced some kind of of ranking system in the animal world, we would still be in dire need of a word other than "hierarchy" to explain ranking systems in the human world. Only human society could have placed a lunatic like Caligula at the apex of the Roman Empire, a witless fool like Louis XVI on the throne of France, a guileless schemer like Mary in the court of Scotland, and a mass murderer like Stalin in the Kremlin of Russia. These immensely powerful individuals were the products not of any special gifts -- physical or mental -- that reared them to positions of commanding dominance; they were the creatures of institutions, of intentionally contrived, human-made structures that we may variously describe as political, economic, or social -- but clearly not organic. They acquired power, often of a very oppressive nature, not because of any visible abilities whatever, but rather by virtue of entirely artificial mechanisms or institutions that are unique to human social relationships. Which is to say that while every society -- a human artifact with all its hierarchical trappings -- must be a community, not every community is necessarily a society.*

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* The use of words like "animal societies" or "social insects"

is highly misleading if we do not lose sight of the highly institutional nature of human societies. Animals may form biotic communities and even develop clearly functional roles within them-- which is a far cry from the bureaucracies and military forces that underpin most human institutions -- but even terms like "hierarchy," "dominance," and "submission" are grossly misleading. Such terms are social. They denote ways in which people are economically exploited and politically controlled, not relationships in which males, say, have preferred access to females or particularly desirable territories. Moreover, the promiscuous use of these terms to cover completely disparate animal "hierarchies" such as the "ranking" that occurs in obviously reproductive mechanisms as beehives and purely opportunistic relationships in lion prides simply adds to the confusion that is already endemic among many animal ethologists and particularly social biologists. This confusion is carried to the point of absurdity when terms like a "queen bee" and a "king of the beasts" are speckled throughout discussions of functionally diverse "hierarchies" that are similar only by human analogy and clearly willful human domination.

By the same token, it should be reasonably clear that nature may be a ground for the rearing of human ethics without being ethical in the usual anthropomorphic sense of the term. What I am saying is that just as there is a graded continuity between plant-animal communities and human society, so there is graded continuity between natural mutualism and human ethics. Neither one or the other ~~are~~ is reducible to each other. Each is separated

from the other by a wealth of phases and highly articulated "stages" in which one emerges from the other without becoming mutually subsumed by each other. Just as the inorganic world becomes the ground for the organic and even penetrates it to the degree that all life-forms are composed of elements and non-living molecular structures, so the organic becomes the ground for the social and penetrates it to the degree that human beings are mammals, indeed, as Paul Shepard has emphasized, Paleolithic primates who live in a highly artificial social world. This graded evolution from the organic to the social occurs not only ~~by~~ through a superimposition of institutional structures that clearly demarcate human society from animal-plant communities; it also occurs ideologically insofar as ethical standards, moral values, and belief patterns share an affiliated relationship to natural facts without necessarily becoming reducible to them. We are social beings in a natural context when we sense and think, just as we are uniquely parental creatures in a mammalian body when we care and nurture our young. None can be dissolved into the other and both have a distinct integrity in their own right. But graded, ~~and~~ mediated, and articulated by phases as the connection between them may be, the connection is always present. In this sense, nature is always the ground for society -- as much in its imperatives for association, all institutional structures aside, as in its stimuli, impulses and drives toward intellectuation and consciousness.

These caveats should be emphasized so that we can move less guardedly and more speculatively into the realm of ecological ethics.

The fact that mutualism, self-maintenance, community, and a germinal kind of freedom lies so close to the heart of the organic and evolutionary in nature and that nature, given all our caveats, lies so close to the heart of the social is a reality too compelling to ignore. I have sketched an image of an ever-restless and continually evolving nature with a thrust toward diversity, degrees of wholeness, and mutualistic traits that stands at odds to a highly imperialistic western tradition that is based on discordant rivalries and a sense of "otherness" riddled with antagonism. The step from natural spontaneity, fecundity, and mutualism to human intentionality, creativity, and conscious cooperation is qualitatively decisive in giving humanity its due. But these human forms of behavior and humanity's capacity for intellectuation are not lacking in germinality. They did not appear ab novo and they must be placed in organic evolution. We do violence to them when we reduce the social to the natural so completely that their elucidation belongs to genetics -- E.O. Wilson's "morality of the gene" -- than to ecology.

Exaggeration tends to straitjacket every reaction to the west's tradition of dualism into an equally extreme one-sidedness of reponse so that the "immorality" of nature (read: "cruelty") must be overstated with a "genetic morality" that matches one wrong reply with another. Radical social ecology offers some testimony to the possibility that nature can be re-visioned again in a way that acknowledges difference without denying continuity, that responds to exaggeration with balance, that rejects an ~~organic~~ genetic ethics without rejecting an organismic ethics. These terminological distinctions are not mere differences of nuance. They raise major issues in our highly problematic way of thinking out the associa-

tion between nature and society. Many well-meaning social ecologists still accede to the western myth that hierarchy, for example, is simply a way of ordering society, which is to say that without ranking or dominance-submission relationships, an animal community from a flock of chickens to a troop of baboons would break down into disastrous chaos. Perhaps -- but it is a very doubtful "perhaps" when this "baboom-troop" mentality is so universalized that it is used to explain human behavior, certainly in its early stages. If modern "civilization" is any guide to the anthropological past, it could be regarded as a vast argument against the virtues of hierarchy which, today even more than in earlier historical periods, is bringing our species to the edge of extinction.

But what is more disturbing is the superficiality of this "baboon-troop" ethology when it is placed under the critical scrutiny of anthropological fact. The strutting domineering male of Victorian culture would have probably been a socially disruptive force in band and early tribal communities. And, indeed, there is much to show that where he emerged and violated the highly egalitarian conventions of early society, he was methodically eliminated. The Hopi Indians, the Ihalmiut Eskimos, and many such band and tribal peoples emphasized the virtues of retiring behavior, of reduction of competition, and of a gentle humility in their treatment of each other. As cultures which fostered an egalitarian sharing of power, they found overly conpicuous, highly egoistic, and the boastful preeing of home-bred megalomaniacs intolerable. Farley Mowatt's account of an Ihalmiut shaman who, tainted by extensive contact with whites, be-

came invidiously possessive of objects and presumably the wives of male members of his own community was simply killed when efforts to correct his behavior were exhausted.[2] This story, like so many similar ones reported by anthropologists, is testimony not only against the prejudices of "baboon-troop" ethology; it casts strong doubts on the identification of hierarchy with social stability so commonplace in modern social thought.[*]

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[*] And by no means modern. From the very inception of hierarchical society and most visibly in the Victorian era, the paterfamilias had a vested interest in identifying his commanding position with "order" and the rule of "law." We are the unknowing heirs of a hierarchical mentality that reaches not only into the political and domestic spheres but into our very way of experiencing reality with its convention of an "order of one to ten," "trade-offs," and "bottom lines." Aristotle, on this score, was more candid than later ideologists when he declared in "Book One" of The Politics that the patriarchal family is the realm of lawlessness, of blind command, and obedience, and of violence.

To claim that radical social ecology seeks to radicalize nature is not an ideological metaphor. It is an attempt to radicalize not only nature -- or, at least, our conception of nature -- but to radicalize the more sound ecological views that only partly countervail the western tradition. This tradition takes its toll on many of its critics in an insidious way. Hierarchy is still taken very much

for granted and the "baboon-troop" ethology is still carelessly applied to early human behavior even when it is often contradicted by anthropological fact. The "morality of the gene" and the reductionist mentality of cybernetic interpretations of ecosystems often intermingles with highly sensitive organicist views. Women anthropologists have made the important point (as Robert Briffault was to emphasize some sixty years ago) that society could [have] never emerged without the nurture provided by females and the prlonged maturation of the young. Lovelock and Margulis have carried this mutualistic relationship into the very "building blocks" of our physical development: the eukaryotic cell. Others from Kropotkin to Trager have made mutualism a guiding principle in evolution.

What may account for the limitations that burden our newer ecological and evolutionary theories is precisely the fact that they remain theories -- not sensibilities. We may "revere" nature, "love" her, hypostasize her role in our lives, but we do so intellectually -- no failing in itself! -- without exploring the sensibility that makes these attitudes organic. Put simply: we possess an organic theory without the organicity of attitude that gives it viability. One feature of our flawed attitude easily comes to mind: our image of nature as an abstraction, perhaps even as a calling, but not necessarily as a "state of mind." This abstracted conceptualization of nature appears most strikingly in our decidedly limited view of organic individuality, of the concrete sense of "self," however dim, that abides in every living organism.

The western tradition betrays the inward side of life: the recognition that every living thing seeks to preserve its own individual being and thereby has a sense of its own existential

self-possession. Our culture teaches us to deal with nonhuman life-forms as though they are mere objects for us, the constituents of a raw collective existence we call "species," "genera," and all the categories that make up the binomial nomenclature. This process of objectification is self-flattering to us -- that is, up to the point when we find that we are the original victims of this betrayal and have been objectified as much as nonhuman beings. Jacob Burckhardt's protest against the abstraction of selfness, of the concrete individual, into vague, impersonal historical categories is an irate objection to a transcendental historicism that sees the past and its suffering as the mere pedestal for our present in all its egocentricity and self-aggrandizement. "Everybody considers his own time to be, not one of the many passing waves, but the fulfillment of time . . ." he declares. Humanity's life, however, "is a whole; its temporal and local vicissitudes appear as up or down, a fortune and misfortune, only to the weakness of our understanding." In this sense, I would add, we owe an eternal debt to the terrible sufferings and fears of all past generations whose lives we have so lightmindedly and arrogantly subsumed to the elevation of our own happiness, such as it may be. There are no "higher purposes" in history or society that warrent their torment and our smug satisfaction as the "apex" of social development.

Tribal peoples are wiser and more sensitive to the hurts of life, past as well as present, than we. The torment of living is not sublated into the collective destiny of a species or genus. It is the hurt of an individual beaver, bear, or deer. Among these

"primitives," the inwardness of life in all its variety is richly subjectivized -- and rightly so -- as the shared experience of the hunter who seeks the game and the prey that "consents" to fall to the impact of his weapons. Not generic "animals" but individual animals have a personhood that evokes respect and fair-dealing. Hence, in this "primitive" world, to speak of nature's subjectivity is not idiosyncratic; it is the very substance of this early tradition and its sensibility -- indeed, the way in which the "other" and "otherness" as a whole is experienced within the entire terrain of reality. Nature is more than a physico-chemical phenomenon; it is alive and intensely "peopled," not only by individual humans but by individual nonhuman life-forms. Where the western tradition is built on a crass disrespect for life, indeed, a hatred of it, the "primitive" tradition is vitally open not only to the hard "facts of life" conceptually but also existentially.

Our abuse of nature has very deep psychic roots -- and ultimately derives from a spiteful hatred of the personal claims of other human beings to life. Owing to its hierarchical and patriarchal origins, the western tradition lacks empathy not only for nonhuman beings but for the human ego itself. The tally of its history is a heap of debris in which the rubble of cities is mixed with smashed machines and fragmented bodies, strewn pell-mell in a vast ruin that constitutes the real "temple" to its "civilization." Animals, to say the least, barely receive any attention as part of this horrible ruin. We basically regard them as the "failures" of evolution of which we, to be sure, are the "apex," the discards of "progress" which exist merely to used, often with monstrous cruelty, for our most trivial ends. The

domination of nature is more than a utilitarian project that is meant to "free" us from the "slime of history." It is a hidden calling, an act of human self-assertion and self-redemption that whispers the subdued and frightening message that we may well prove to be evolution's greatest failure in the cosmic scheme of things.

Not accidentally, it is really the artist who normally "feels" for nature and accepts her on her own terms, not with the abstractions of the scientist for whom nature is a mere grindstone with which to achieve intellectual elegance. In art, nature appears as she really is -- richly concrete, explosive in her wealth of distinct forms and colors, identifiable in her multitude of existential phenomena and their claims to individual recognition. Here, in the paintings of a Turner and the novels of a Tolstoy, art finally comes together with an ecological sensibility to produce not only an ethics of goodness but an ethics of beauty. The Greek ideal that virtue is adorned in its own esthetic sublimeness is realized in that ancient sense of harmony from which all the great goals of humanity draw their inspiration and sense of meaning.

Burlington, VT, July 1, 1984

Notes:

1. William Trager: Symbiosis (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.; 1970), p. vii.
2. Farley Mowatt: The People of the Deer (New York: Pyramid Publications; 1968), p. 183.
3. Jacob Burckhardt: Ueber Studium der Geschichte (Kroener Verlag; 1905), p. 295.