CRITICAL THEORY AND GREEN POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

Comparisons between early critical theory and green politics can be drawn because both of them, in different ways, amount to a critique of various Enlightenment themes. They both bemoan the dark side of science, industrialism and modernity, and critical theorists, like eocentrics, seek the emancipation not just of human beings but of nature as a whole. The stress here is on early critical theory, and a fuller picture of the relationship between critical theory and green politics would involve a detailed examination of the work of Jurgen Habermas. I only touch briefly on Habermas in this chapter, and these present considerations are excellently complemented by Robyn Ekersley’s (1990) paper on Habermas and green theory.

Cursory understandings of green politics might lead us to question this assessment of it as in at least partial opposition to Enlightenment themes. On such a cursory understanding, green politics is precisely about mobilizing the resources of the Enlightenment – particularly technological ones – to ameliorate the ugly side of industrialist progress: acid rain, global warming, and holes in the ozone layer. Technology is mobilized to ameliorate the damage that technology has brought about.

Less cursory understandings of green politics, though, call these strategies into question. The ‘technological fix’ as dark-greens call it – amounts to an evasion of political responsibility, in the sense that most of the environmental problems we confront are not technological but political. Greens agree with critical theorists that the nature of the political-cultural arena is such that the ‘right’ kinds of political decisions are hard to make. This is because the political-cultural arena is so saturated with a particular ‘way of thinking’ that it is difficult even to ask the right questions, let alone put into effect the policies that might follow from answering them correctly.

Fundamental to a change of direction in dark-green terms is a profound shift in the strategies and assumptions of our lives, founded on a changed relationship with the natural world – and in this respect the critical theory of the Frankfurt School mirrors many standard green sentiments. In the burgeoning literature on the field of environmental ethics one theme stands out big and bold: that our instrumental relationship with the natural world needs to change to one that recognizes its intrinsic value – either through standard rights-talk strategies, or through encouraging us to a metaphysical sense of closeness to nature so that we would see harm to nature as self-harm.

The word ‘instrumental’, mentioned a moment or two ago in respect of a description of our relationship with the natural world is, of course, a word closely associated with the work of critical theorists, and it also accurately describes the manipulative, means-oriented relationship with the natural world that Greens are keen to criticize.

Similarly, in terms of an analysis of the history of such instrumentality, the word Enlightenment bulks large in both green and critical theoretical descriptions. More specifically, the British scientist Francis Bacon plays a leading role in the tale of terror. He is pilloried in Fritjof Capra’s The Turning Point (widely read in the green movement) as one who argued that the goal of scientific knowledge is to ‘control and dominate nature’, and who made his point in terms that were

not only passionate but often outright vicious. Nature, in his view, had to be ‘hounded in her wanderings’, ‘bound into service’, and made a ‘slave’. She was to be ‘put in constraint’, and the aim of the scientists was to ‘torture nature’s secrets from her’

(Capra 1985: 40-1)

Bacon also occupies the first two-and-a-half pages of Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment as Voltaire’s ‘father of experimental philosophy’ who put into effect the ‘program of the Enlightenment’, which involved the ‘disenchantedness of the world’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1973: 3) and whose ultimate aim was to enable ‘man’ (for it was he) ‘to hold sway over a disenchanted nature’ (ibid.: 4). The instrumentality is clear, too, in Bacon’s own quoted belief that

the true end, scope, or office of knowledge . . . [does not] . . . consist in any plausible, delectable, revered or admired discourse, or any satisfactory arguments, but in effecting and working, and in the discovery of particulars not revealed before, for the better endowment and help of man’s life.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 1973: 5, my emphasis)

As well as a clear expression of instrumentality, Bacon emphasizes the anthropocentric nature of this project in the last few words, and this, too, is a principal green theme in their assessment of the roots of our environmental predicament.

The superficial similarities of concern between critical theory and green politics, then, are clear. But I was drawn to this comparison as much by what I expected to be difference as by similarity. More particularly I have become increasingly aware of, and disturbed by, the unauthorised nature of green politics. By this I do not mean that no thinking is going on, or that theoretical
aspects of the relationship between human beings and their environment are not sophisticatedly dealt with – I have already indicated that the literature in environmental ethics is already vast and still growing. Yet what is lacking, though, is a material and historical analysis of the relationship between human beings and the non-human natural world – and a corollary of this is that the issue of social change is undertheorized in green politics.

Green tracts are conspicuously written in the conditional tense: ‘If there were a green government, it would phase out nuclear power in the lifetime of a parliament’; or ‘a green society would be more conserving and less wasteful’.

Only very rarely do we get any hint as to how the conditional is to be redeemed, and when we do it is invariably couched in rather feeble terms. Thus, for example, ‘education’ is seen as the panacea for a whole range of desirable projects ranging from birth control to a pacified relationship with the natural world. Of course education has a role to play, but the shunting into service of this strategy without theorizing its drawbacks and limitations is tantamount to naivety. I think it is essential, for example, that Greens take seriously the material and ideological circumstances within which the ‘call to education’ is made, and which are surely in danger of appropriating and disfiguring the project before it has even got off the ground. This embeddedness or contextualization of strategy (and of the green programme in general) is what I believe to be undertheorized in green literature.

Now, one of the aspects of Karl Marx’s thought that is presently the butt of a great deal of smug irony is his anti-Utopianism. Marx’s work is conspicuous for the absence of sentences constructed in the conditional tense. It is very hard for students to write essays on topics like ‘what would a communist society look like?’ because Marx never tells us. We have to make do with aphorisms, such as that the principle of distributive justice in a communist society would be ‘from each according to his ability to each according to his needs’. This is instructive, but it hardly amounts to a full-blown description of communist society, and it certainly pales into insignificance alongside the lengthy descriptions of green society which constitute the major genre in green literature – in Britain at least (see, for example, Porritt 1984, Irvine and Ponton 1988, Icke 1990, Kemp and Wall 1990). Marx refused to entertain such descriptions, and his most frequent reply to those who asked him to describe what communist society would look like was that he wasn’t in the business of ‘writing recipes for the cookshops of the future’.

Of course, Marx had a good reason for this position. He believed that material practices and the value systems that they produce and help reproduce are first and foremost historical practices and value systems. To the extent that the future is an unknown land which is itself forged by practice, its precise contours are unknowable. More importantly, in the present context, programmes for social change can only be innocent of embeddedness and of context at the price of being Utopian in Marx’s specialized sense of the word. So contemplative solutions to social problems (in the guise of the positings of an invented ‘Utopia’) may contribute to the culture of oppositional movements,

but they can never constitute practical solutions to the problems which gave rise to those movements. In his Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx wrote that, ‘Social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice’ (Feuerbach 1976: 285).

On some readings, the green position of ‘deep ecology’ is precisely an example of a mystical answer to a problem whose rational solution needs to be found in material human practice rather than in contemplation.

This chapter, then, is intended to test two hypotheses. First, that critical theory’s critique of Enlightenment will lead to fruitful comparisons with the green political critique of the same phenomenon. Second, that critical theory’s grounding in Marxist theory might provide the material and historical analysis of the relationship between human beings and the natural world which green politics so conspicuously lacks. If it does, then it might also provide the ground for a non-Utopian (in Marx’s sense) resolution of the counter-productive aspects of that relationship.

In what follows I refer mostly to those texts in the early to middle periods of critical theory which most obviously deal with the relationship between human beings and the natural world. They are: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* (particularly ch. 3), and Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* and *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (particularly ch. 2).

**INSTRUMENTAL REASON**

The central theme to emerge is critical theory’s observation that it is the spread of a certain form of Enlightenment rationality to all areas and most corners of conscious existence that underpins our exploitative relationship with the natural world. This rationality has different names at different points of critical theory, and is variously called subjective rationality, instrumental rationality, formalized rationality, and technological rationality.

The themes of this rationality are manipulation and domination, so that on the Baconian view, and in the context of the natural world, ‘What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to dominate it and other men’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1973: 4), and, ‘Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator towards men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them’ (ibid.: 9). The desire (or on some critical theoretical readings, the need) to dominate nature leads to the development of instrumental reason which, as it extends its territory of application, leads to the ever more exclusive apprehension of the social and natural worlds in an instrumental fashion. From an instrumentalist point of view, nature has no meaning in itself; rather its meaning comes from our instrumental apprehension of it. Thus the ‘disenchantment of the world is the extirpation of animism’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1973: 5, 13). The implication is that at the end of this process everything would be apprehended instrumentally and
that the terrorist sway of instrumental reason is a historically specific experience. But critical theory’s view differs from the green one in that no critical theorist believes that pre-Enlightenment attitudes towards the natural world can be uncomplicatedly massaged back to life in the contemporary context. Horkheimer asks: ‘Is it possible to void the conflicts [between human beings and nature] by a “return to nature”, by a revival of old doctrines?” (Horkheimer 1946: 109), and the answer he gives is no, because “The complete transformation of the world into a world of means rather than of ends is itself the consequence of the historical development of the methods of production’ (Horkheimer 1946: 102). This development is irreversible and we carry around its mental and material consequences as pieces of baggage that we cannot simply throw overboard. They constitute what we are as practical creatures.

Again, Horkheimer writes that, ‘we are the heirs, for better or worse, of the Enlightenment and technological progress. To oppose these by regretting to more primitive stages does not alleviate the permanent crisis they have brought about’ (Horkheimer 1946: 127). Marcuse confirms that because of the historical nature of our relationship with the natural world, the “liberation of nature” cannot mean returning to a pre-technological stage, but advancing to the use of the achievements of technological civilization for freeing man and nature from the destructive abuse of science and technology in the service of exploitation” (Marcuse 1972: 60).

There is support here for those who would want to persuade Greens away from flirtation with pre-industrial forms of society. Greens have found it hard to shake off accusations that they are anti-progressive, and in this respect they could help their cause by wholeheartedly embracing the critical theoretical observation that not only is history a one-way street, but also that we are irremediably, presently, and wholly constituted by that history. Put simply, there is no going back, and going forward entails going forward as we are, and not as we would like to be.

**HUMAN BEINGS AND THE NATURAL WORLD**

This refusal to contemplate a revival of the past, and the insistence, rather, on the present as containing the seeds of an improved future, is crucial in at least one respect in the context of comparing green theory with critical theory. In trying to edge us towards a more harmonious relationship with the non-human natural world, some Greens blur the distinction between that world and human beings almost to the point of erasure. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher and ‘founder’ of deep ecology, for example, grounds his environmental ethic in the notion of a ‘Self’ (capital ‘S’) which encompasses both my embodied ‘self’ (small ‘s’) and the environment within which I live – an environment which begins with my immediate surroundings but which, given the implications of ecological interdependence, extends in principle to the entire universe (Naess 1989). Once this metaphysics is in place, irresponsible

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‘independent thought’, as Horkheimer calls it (Horkheimer 1946: 127) would become impossible.

Horkheimer formulates this as what he calls a paradox, but which reads more to me like a consequence: ‘On the one hand’, he writes, ‘the destructive antagonism of self and nature, an antagonism epitomizing the history of our civilization, reaches its peak in this era’, and on the other, ‘philosophical thinking, whose task it is to essay a reconciliation, has come to deny or to forget the very existence of this antagonism’ (Horkheimer 1946: 162). Once again, the more our apprehension of the world becomes saturated with instrumental reason, the more difficult it is to mobilize any opposition to it. This is obviously a central issue in respect of any attempt to heal our wounded relationship with the natural world and I shall have more to say on it later.

As far as a comparison between green politics and critical theory is concerned, Greens will often say that our relationship with the natural world is troubled because we treat it as a means, and to this extent they will agree with critical theorists. The difference lies in the level of sophistication. In distinguishing between instrumental and other forms of reason critical theorists help to make clearer the nature of the enemy, because by naming it we understand better both what it is and what the alternatives might be.

**HISTORY**

Greens recognize the historical nature of the environmental malaise which has given rise to their movement in that they focus on Enlightenment scientific method as the source of our exploitative relationship with the natural world. Given this starting point, there is a distinct tendency in green literature (and particularly in ecofeminist literature) to view the pre-Enlightenment human relationship with the natural world as more desirable than the one we presently have. This leads to the elevation to vanguard status of contemporary peoples who practise such a ‘pre-Enlightenment’ relationship (for example, North American Indians and rain-forest tribes), and to the exhortation that we should learn from these peoples and somehow copy their benign practices in the context of our own societies. We read, for example, that ‘Deep ecology ... requires openness to the black bear, becoming truly intimate with the black bear, so that honey drips down your fur coat as you catch the bus to work’ (Robert Aitken, in Fox 1986: 59).

The difficulty with this green position is that it is Utopian in the sense outlined earlier, and critical theory is at odds with most green thinking in this respect. There is little indication in green theory that specific historical and material circumstances might have ‘produced’ our contemporary relationship with the natural world, nor — more importantly — that we carry that inheritance with us as an inherent and irreversible part of our present practices. Our troubled relationship with the natural world cannot simply be wished away.

Critical theory is clear (with Horkheimer as a partial exception; see p. 207)
activity in the environment amounts, literally, to Self-mutilation (see also Mathews 1991).

Greens who subscribe to this sort of view (and even those who subscribe to less extreme versions of it) often point to pre-Enlightenment times as a period when such a view was so commonplace that it was acted upon without a second thought. They then urge us to recover this sensibility, arguing that if we did, our relationships with the natural world would immediately become less exploitative and more sustainable. Critical theory’s point, however, would be that even if this were an accurate description of the pre-Enlightenment period, its recovery in the modern world is out of the question. If critical theory is right in this regard, then deep ecological exhortations in the context of modern industrial society to develop an ecological sense of ‘Self’ are, strictly, Utopian.

Not all Greens, though, subscribe to the dissolution of the human and non-human natural worlds in a holistic ‘oneness’. Many are prepared to accept some sort of separation and to argue for pacts of reduced interference in the non-human natural environment. Roughly speaking, the justifications for such pacts split into two. First, there are those who argue that we should be more benign because it is in our own best interests as human beings to be so; while others suggest that the natural world (or at least parts of it) has intrinsic value from which a generalized ‘right to exist’ is derived.

Many Greens will reject the first position as being too instrumental, in the sense of viewing nature principally as a vehicle for human satisfaction. The second position is probably the more common in green literature, although the problems involved in establishing intrinsic value for the natural world, working out which of its categories should be accorded intrinsic value status (individuals?, species?, ecosystems?), and in deciding whether this applies equally to California Redwoods and to the AIDS virus have proved enormous.

Interestingly, critical theory comes up with a view about the relationship between human beings and the non-human natural world similar to this second green position. The fact is, say the critical theorists, that instrumental reason has so come to dominate our apprehension of the natural world that the only value we can conceive it having is use-value. Horkheimer remarks that,

The story of the boy who looked up at the sky and asked, ‘Daddy, what is the moon supposed to advertise?’ is an allegory of what has happened to the relation between man and nature in the era of formalized reason. On the one hand, nature has been stripped of all intrinsic value or meaning. On the other, man has been stripped of all aims except self-preservation.

(Horkheimer 1946: 101)

The implications are twofold: that nature can have intrinsic value, and that ‘man’ needs aims beyond self-preservation so that such value can emerge.

But critical theorists, and particularly Marcuse, are adamant that the cause of nature is not advanced by positing a spurious ‘closeness’ of human beings to nature, nor do they believe that nature will ever exist other than ‘for’ human beings. ‘There is’, writes Marcuse, ‘a definite internal limit to the idea of the liberation of nature through “human appropriation”’ because ‘“Appropriation”, no matter how human, remains appropriation of a (living) object by a subject’ (Marcuse 1972: 68, 69). He asks:

Can the human appropriation of nature ever achieve the elimination of violence, cruelty, and brutality in the daily sacrifice of animal life for the physical reproduction of the human race? To treat nature ‘for its own sake’ sounds good, but it is certainly not for the sake of the animal to be eaten, nor probably for the sake of the plant.

(Marcuse 1972: 68)

He concludes that, ‘The end of this war, the perfect peace in the animal world – this idea belongs to the Orphic myth, not to any conceivable historical reality’, but that, ‘no free society is imaginable which does not, under its “regulative idea of reason” make a concerted effort to reduce consistently the suffering which man imposes on the natural world’ (Marcuse 1972: 68).

So Marcuse’s ideal is what he calls a ‘pacified world’, but this will be a world in which human beings and nature are still in opposition. He writes that he is proposing no ideal reconciliation between human beings and nature because, ‘Pacification presupposes mastery of Nature, which is and remains the object opposed to the developing subject. But there are two kinds of mastery: a repressive and a liberating one’ (Marcuse 1964: 236), and he argues that nature will always exist for human beings, but that the question is whether this will be ‘for its own sake’ or as ‘brute raw material’ (Marcuse 1972: 62). To a large extent the answer to this question, for Marcuse, depends on the development of a ‘new science’, one that will not only make more use of existing alternative technologies but develop new ones unimaginable within capitalist horizons (see Alford 1985: 49–68).

Jurgen Habermas has written relatively little on either the environmental crisis in general or on the relationship between human beings and the natural world in particular. However, in view of his interest in knowledge and human interests he has been obliged to say something about the ‘proper’ relationship between human beings and the natural world in the context of ‘knowledge accumulation’. What he says places him firmly in the critical-theoretical tradition as outlined above. From the point of view of a theory of knowledge, he writes, ‘there is for this domain of reality only one theoretically fruitful attitude, namely the objectivating attitude of the natural-scientific, experimenting observer’ (Habermas 1982: 243–4). Habermas recognizes the existence of an ‘ecological problematic’ but is convinced (despite the well-known objections of some sections of the green movement; see, for example, Eckerley 1990) that ‘this problematic can be dealt with satisfactorily within the anthropocentric framework of a discourse ethic’ (Habermas 1982: 247). In sum, he agrees with Joel Whitebook that ‘the proper norms for regulating the relation between society and nature would somehow follow from the

In other words, healing the rift between human beings and the natural world, for Habermas, is not a matter of joining what was once put asunder, but of getting the relations between human beings right first. Indeed, in this respect Habermas goes further than his critical-theoretical predecessors. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse all admit of the possibility – even the necessity – of a ‘nature-in-itself’, while Habermas is so concerned with the theoretical difficulties of gaining either moral or epistemological access to ‘nature-in-itself’ that he prefers to stay on this side of it and to generate solutions to the environmental crisis from within a principled anthropocentrism. The worst thing about this from a green point of view is that the crisis seems to be of secondary importance. Even once the public sphere has been invigorated in the way that Habermas demands, there is no guarantee that the free and equal conversations that ensue will grant a more valued status to the non-human natural world than it has at present. In other words, the liberation of nature is only a possibility for Habermas (and is not necessarily entailed by human emancipation), and Greens will want stronger guarantees than this.

To sum up so far, critical theorists believe instrumental reason to be at the root of our exploitative relationship with the natural world. They do not suggest, though, that this can be righted by an appeal to pre-Enlightenment sensibilities – such sensibilities are irrecoverable. At the same time, we must live with our separation from the natural world rather than try to dissolve it away. Indeed, as we shall see, this very separation is the condition for a new and pacified relationship between human beings and the natural world.

REASON

Critical theorists in general, and Horkheimer in particular in this context, are clear that while instrumental reason is an obstacle to such a pacified relationship, this must not be taken to mean that reason as such should be abandoned, or that nature should be exalted above reason, or that reason should be dissolved in nature. There is a tendency in green literature to follow any one of these routes under the general guise of encouraging us to recognize the wisdom of nature and to allow it to speak to us, as if such spontaneous and pre-reflexive attentuation were the way forward to renewal.

Horkheimer sees this as positively dangerous. He argues that dissolving reason in a ‘fight for survival’ ‘entails the rejection of any elements of the mind that transcend the function of adaptation and consequently are not instruments of self-preservation’ (Horkheimer 1946: 126). This is dangerous because it is precisely instrumental reason that causes all the problems, and so any strategy which reinforces the instrumentality of reason is counter-productive. This, according to Horkheimer, is exactly what happens when reason abdicates in favour of nature. What is required is more of a different sort of reason, rather than the dissolution of reason itself. Thus:

The equating of reason and nature, by which reason is debased and raw nature exalted, is a typical fallacy of the era of rationalization. Instrumentalized subjective reason either eulogizes nature as pure vitality or disparages it as brute force, instead of treating it like a text to be interpreted by philosophy that, if rightly read, will unfold a tale of infinite suffering. Without committing the fallacy of equating nature and reason, mankind must try to reconcile the two.

(Horkheimer 1946: 125)

The point is that such reconciliation will be impossible so long as the tool of reconciliation – reason – is only ever comprehended and used in its instrumentalist guise. Instrumental reason can never effect a reconciliation because it operates with a set of assumptions and intentions precisely opposed to reconciliation. Moreover, if reason needs to be rescued from instrumentality, then the very worst we can do is to try to effect an equation of reason and nature because this obscures the very non-instrumental features of reason which we need to preserve.

Solution 1: The material conditions for new thinking

By now it will have become clear that a central feature of critical theory’s programme for a reconciliation between human beings and the natural world is the domestication of instrumental reason and its supplementation with non-instrumental forms of reason – variously called objective, substantive, or post-technological reason. What is needed is a reason that is not blind to values and that is capable of being used to decide on the desirability of ends. Horkheimer describes this as ‘independent thought’, and he appears to tie it into a historical moment when we shall be free to think beyond mere self-preservation. Indeed he suggests that there have been moments like this: ‘During his long history, man has at times acquired such freedom from the immediate pressure of nature that he could think about nature and reality without directly or indirectly thereby planning for his self-preservation’ (Horkheimer 1946: 102).

To this extent the second hypothesis about critical theory that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter seems partly borne out. I suggested that critical theory might provide us with a material and historical account of our relationship with the natural world which would improve on green theory’s somewhat idealistic and Utopian version. Horkheimer here points to the material conditions required for healing the rift between human beings and the natural world: a productive capacity so fantastic that the realm of necessity is transformed into the realm of freedom, thereby freeing everyone to think beyond self-preservation.

This certainly provides the material basis for an account of improved relations between human beings and nature. But, interestingly, it emerges at the price of making precisely the cornucopian assumptions that Greens say we are not entitled to make in the context of a finite earth. In other words, if
freedom from scarcity is the condition for a pacified relationship between human beings and nature, then Greens will argue that such a relationship can never come about because the condition is unfulfillable.

Put differently, green politics is founded precisely on a critique of the possibility of the very condition which Horkheimer appears to posit as necessary for improved relations between human beings and the natural world: high levels of production and consumption. Of course these hypotheses raise the question as to just what kind of level of production Horkheimer had in mind. Us comfortable members of the Western European middle-class, for example, hardly feel ourselves under 'the immediate pressure of nature' (as Horkheimer puts it), and in this respect we've already entered Horkheimer's realm of freedom. To the extent that the majority of green support is derived precisely from post-materialist groups drawn from that relatively wealthy class, Horkheimer's thesis would seem to be borne out. Is this the level of production and consumption he had in mind? But then what of green warnings that these levels are only generalizable across the planet at the cost of devastating environmental destruction?

Then there is still the problem of all those many members of modern industrial societies, freed from the immediate pressures of nature, who have no interest in green politics at all. At best Horkheimer's formulation would seem to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for better relations between human beings and the natural world. And at worst, we might point out that the people with the healthiest relationship with the natural world are not those freed from the pressure of nature but those most consistently and crudely confronted with it at every turn. This most obviously applies to peoples such as rain-forest tribes and North American Indians, but it might also apply to the modern organic vegetable grower trying to raise decent carrots and potatoes.

Interestingly, Marcuse reaches precisely the opposite conclusion to Horkheimer in respect of the material conditions necessary for a pacified relationship with the natural world. He bemoans contemporary society's 'containment' of liberation and argues that,

To a great extent, it is the sheer quantity of goods, services, work, and recreation in the overdeveloped countries which effectuates this containment. Consequently, qualitative change seems to presuppose a quantitative change in the advanced standard of living, namely reduction of overdevelopment.

(Marcuse 1964: 242)

This is a clear echo of green demands for de-industrialization, or what Ted Trainer has called 'de-development' (Trainer 1985: 176–8; see also Keekok Lee, Ch. 6 this volume).

The difference, though, is that the Greens' demand for reduced production and consumption is based on their assessment of the necessary limits to growth in the context of a finite planet. It is simply impossible, they say, to sustain economic growth at present levels for much longer than the next few decades. Marcuse's recommendation for a reduction in overdevelopment, on the other hand, stems from his concern about the tightening of the screw of instrumental reason which development presupposes. Put differently, present fantastic production rates have been made possible (at least partly) by the application of instrumental reason to various fields of human enquiry and practice. The implication is that increased production (of the sort advocated by Horkheimer in order to boost us from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom) will involve increased application of instrumental reason. Given that it is precisely the domination of instrumental reason which critical theory identifies as the basis of the conflictful relationship between human beings and the natural world, the last thing we should want to do, argues Marcuse, is to follow an upward spiral of production which would tighten instrumental reason's stranglehold. He concludes that, 'The standard of living attained in the most advanced industrial areas is not a suitable model of development if the aim is pacification', because of, 'what this standard has made of Man and Nature' (Marcuse 1964: 242).

In respect of the desirability of reduced production and consumption, then, Marcuse and green theorists are in agreement – but for different reasons. In the context of our search for a materialist account in critical theory this is ironic, because in this case it seems to be green theory which makes the hard-headed assessment of the material impossibility of ever-expanding growth in a finite system (that is, the planet), and Marcuse who bases his critique on the counter-productive aspects of a particular mode of thought.

**Solution 2: The role of philosophy**

Indeed, despite these gestures in the direction of the material preconditions for a pacified relationship between human beings and the natural world, it is of course true that in general critical theory is more interested in a new type of reason and the role it might play than in its material base. Philosophy, particularly in Horkheimer, has a crucial role to play. In the *Eclipse of Reason* he writes that, 'An underlying assumption of the present discussion has been that philosophical awareness of these processes may help to reverse them' (Horkheimer 1946: 162). And by 'philosophical', Horkheimer means something quite specific because, for him, good philosophy aims at an understanding of the natural world in and for itself. Thus there have been times when 'philosophy aimed at an insight that was not to serve useful calculations but was intended to further understanding of nature in and for itself' (Horkheimer 1946: 102).

But philosophy is not simply confined to the passive role of understanding the natural world, for Horkheimer it is also the voice of the natural world. He bemoans the passing of an era when

Once it was the endeavor of art, literature and philosophy to express the meaning of things and of life, to be the voice of all that is dumb, to endow
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nature with an organ for making known her sufferings, or, we might say, to call reality by its rightful name. Today nature’s tongue is taken away. Once it was thought that each utterance, word, cry or gesture had an intrinsic meaning; today it is merely an occurrence.

(Horkheimer 1946: 101)

Horkheimer is not suggesting that philosophy can tell nature’s story in any narrative sense. He means, rather, that philosophy speaks nature’s language, which is a language of ends and not of means. For instance, in a resounding cry of support for the ideals of the Enlightenment, he writes that, ‘Distorted though the great ideals of civilization - justice, equality, freedom - may be, they are nature’s protestations against her plight, the only formulated testimonies we possess’ (Horkheimer 1946: 182). Horkheimer cannot mean that nature desires - in any self-conscious sense - justice, equality and freedom. But these ideals are conspicuous by their location in a discourse of ends and not of means, and in this respect they are part of a discourse which, if it could be widened, so repelling the onslaught of means-oriented instrumental reason, would provide the foundation for improved relations between human beings and the natural world. Under these new circumstances there would be room for talk of nature as an end in itself and as having intrinsic value, rather than as a means to the reproduction of production. All this underscores the importance, noted earlier in the context of Horkheimer, of keeping reason and nature separate. If reason abdicates in favour of nature then nature loses its champion and forfeits any chance of having limits placed upon the activities of human beings in respect of it: ‘nature is today more than ever conceived as a mere tool of man. It is the object of total exploitation that has no aim set by reason, and therefore no limit’ (Horkheimer 1946: 108). Bounds can only be set by ‘objective reason’ (Horkheimer 1946: 180), and so attempts either to dissolve reason in nature, or to widen still further the scope of instrumental reason, must be firmly resisted.

Solution 3: The aesthetic

Romantic defences of the natural world have often been couched in aesthetic terms, but beauty is a notoriously flimsy basis on which to build a sound and lasting redound. Greens have come to use the appeal to aesthetic sensibility as one among a number of forms of defence, operating on the assumption (for instance) that while it might work for whole ecosystems (for example, a rainforest), it might not work for particular bits of it (for example, snakes). Basing arguments for intrinsic value on the beauty of the object, then, while it might work for some objects, will clearly not do for enough of them to satisfy green demands for a generalized environmental ethic.

Critical theory’s recourse to the aesthetic in the context of our relationship with the natural world is notable for its concentration not on particular objects of aesthetic sensibility, but on the realm of the aesthetic in general. Critical theorists are pushed to consider this realm by the implications of their own enquiry. I have already noted critical theory’s suggestion that our social context might become so wholly saturated with instrumental reason that apprehending the world from any point of view other than the instrumental would become impossible.

The very possibility of critical theory, then, presupposes a space from which to make the critique – a space which must, by implication, be relatively free of instrumental reason. For critical theorists this space can be defined as one which constitutes a realm of ends and not of means. We have already seen Horkheimer referring to ‘art, literature and philosophy’ as the ‘voice of all that is dumb’ (see p. 201), and I suggested that we should understand this voice as a voice of ends and not of means.

Marcuse, too, points towards a sort of aesthetic rationality when he writes that,

Civilization produces the means for freeing Nature from its own brutality, its own insufficiency, its own blindness, by virtue of the cognitive and transforming power of Reason. And Reason can fulfill this function only as post-technological rationality, in which technics is itself the instrumentality of pacification, organon of the ‘art of life’.

The function of Reason then converges with the function of Art.

(Marcuse 1964: 23)

And the function of art, according to Marcuse, is to provide us with a realm of ends in virtue of which the desirability of present actions can be judged - that is, precisely what is lacking in a context saturated with instrumental reason. ‘The artist’, he says, ‘possesses the ideas which, as final causes, guide the construction of certain things’ (Marcuse 1964: 23), and so the aesthetic realm is a space from within which to resist the spread of instrumental reason.

Solution 4: The emancipation of the senses: nature as subject

One strategy towards pacifying our relationship with the natural world has been to try to treat it as a subject in its own right. There is a sense in which the animal rights movement, for instance, has grounded itself in the subjecthood of certain animals, arguing that if we as subjects feel entitled to dignified treatment then we can hardly deny similar treatment to animals admitted to subjecthood. For those who want an ethic which covers vast swathes of the environment, and not just some animals similar in certain ways to human beings, this does not go far enough. Given standard conceptions of subjecthood, though, it is hard to arge convincingly that even trees are subjects, let alone trickier cases such as mountains and wildernesses. In any case, ethical Greens are nearly always placed in the position of merely appealing for a different ethical sensibility, without being able to give any good grounds for why we should, for instance, think of nature as subject. Critical theory can perhaps help here because, borrowing from Marx, it generates the subjecthood
of nature from the nature of human beings as practical (specifically, labouring) creatures.

Marx theorized the relationship between subject and object in a potentially helpful way (from an ecological point of view) in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, and Marcuse makes significant use of this work in Counter-
revolution and Revolt. Horkheimer pointed the way in 1946 by writing that the problem was that ‘subjective’ (that is, instrumental) reason, ‘made nature a mere object, and that it failed to discover the trace of itself in such objectivation, in the concepts of matter and things no less than in those of gods or spirit’ (Horkheimer 1946: 176). This opens the way to a recognition of the subject in the object by seeing the subject’s trace in the object, but it is an ideal trace in that it is only there by virtue of conceptualization. Marcuse tries to get closer to a material account of the extent of the object’s subjecthood.

Referring to the Manuscripts he notes Marx’s assertion that, ‘the senses of the social man are other than those of the non-social man’ (Marcuse 1972: 64). Marcuse agrees with this, particularly in the context of advanced capitalism where sense experience, he believes, is conditioned to ‘immunize’ man against the very unfamiliar experience of the possibilities of human freedom’ (Marcuse 1972: 62). Human emancipation, then, presupposes ‘the emergence of a new type of man, different from the human subject of class society in his very nature, in his physiology’ (Marcuse 1972: 64, my emphasis).

The emancipated sense, claims Marcuse, would ‘guide the “human [pacified] appropriation” of nature’ (Marcuse 1972: 65) – and this in two ways. First, they would apprehend the natural world as an arena for the practice and fulfillment of distinctly human faculties: the ‘creative, aesthetic faculties’ (Marcuse 1972: 64). This would amount to a resistance to the sway of instrumental reason because, as we have seen, the aesthetic faculty (as end- oriented) constitutes an antidote to the means-oriented nature of instrumental reason. In this sense, nature has to be seen as ‘an ally in the struggle against . . . exploitative societies’ (Marcuse 1972: 59) because its liberation would involve the ‘recovery of the life-enhancing forces in nature’ – its ‘sensuous aesthetic qualities’ (ibid.: 60).

Second, the emancipated senses would (in the words of Marx), ‘relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing’ (quoted in Marcuse 1972: 65). And according to Marcuse’s reading of the Manuscripts they would do this because, and inasmuch as, ‘the thing itself is objectified human Verhalten: objectification of human relationships, and is thus itself humanly related to man’ (Marcuse 1972: 65). For Marcuse this provides the basis for a more convincing materialist account of the relationship between human subject and material object, understood in respect of the centrality of labour: ‘it grasps the world of things as objectified human labour, shaped by human labour’ (Marcuse 1972: 65). So in the terms used by Horkheimer above, the trace of the subject in the object is that of the labour of the subject on the object. Marcuse would argue that while Horkheimer’s notion of trace is ideal (the concept), his own is material (the worked object). The outcome of this is that nature as object has now become ‘subject–object’ – a ‘life force in its own right’, and therefore (again in Marx’s words) has ‘lost its mere utility’ (Marcuse 1972: 65).

Greens might applaud this attempt to work out a basis for the subjecthood of the natural world (‘a subject with which to live in a common universe’ – Marcuse 1972: 60) but I suspect that, in Marcuse’s case, they would baulk at founding it in human labour. Two years after Marcuse published Counter- revolution and Revolt, Fritz Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful appeared. There, Schumacher wrote that, ‘we are estranged from reality and inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves. Even the great Dr Max fell into this devastating error when he formulated the so-called “labour theory of value” ’ (Schumacher 1974: 11). Schumacher goes on to point out that while it is true that much of the capital we use (knowledge of all types, infrastructure, machinery, etc.) is produced by labour, ‘Far larger is the capital provided by nature and not by man – and we do not even recognise it as such’ (Schumacher 1974: 11).

The problem is that if the subject can only recognize the trace of itself in the object upon which it has worked, what is to become of the unworked object; will it be disallowed subjecthood? This is particularly a problem in a context close to green hearts – the defence of wilderness. It is wilderness precisely because it has been (more or less) free of the influence of human beings. If one were to adopt Marcuse’s labour-based materialist account of the subjecthood of nature, one could get into the ludicrous position of supporting the mineral exploitation of Antarctica because only then would we apprehend the icy waste as ‘humanly related to man’.

There are, of course, various ways in which Marcuse might respond to this putative green criticism. He might, for example, suggest that under emancipated conditions what he calls post-technological rationality would rule out exploitative use of wilderness. He might also (or simultaneously) point out that labour can take many forms, and, particularly in view of his notion (borrowed from Marx) of the senses as practical or ‘active, constitutive’ (Marcuse 1972: 63), he would suggest that the exercise of ‘radical sensibility’ (ibid.: 63) is itself a form of labour.

In other words, one does not need to labour only in a traditional sense of the word in order to apprehend our human relationship with nature. In this context it is interesting to read in Bill McKibben’s widely read The End of Nature that we have ended nature by globally changing the weather and thus making ‘every spot on earth man-made and artificial’ (McKibben 1990: 54). McKibben reads this negatively, but Marcuse might say that we have at last fulfilled the historical condition for the complete and total human apprehension of the subjecthood of nature, in that we can now say (for the first time in history) that we have performed work on every single part of our environment.
exactly limited and even – on some readings – non-existent. We have already identified the aesthetic realm as one where a different sort of rationality operates, but Horkheimer, for one, mourns the passing of historical moments when genuinely speculative thought was possible – even if only for a privileged few. Now, he writes, such thought is ‘altogether liquidated’ as ‘meditation’ is superseded by ‘pragmatic intelligence’ (Horkheimer 1946: 103).

Horkheimer believes indeed that such pragmatic intelligence (in the form of what he here calls ‘subjective reason’) is a fundamental and ineradicable aspect of the human condition. He writes that, ‘the social need of controlling nature has always conditioned the structure and form of man’s thinking and thus given primacy to subjective reason’ (Horkheimer 1946: 175), and that, ‘from the time when reason became the instrument for domination of human and extra-human nature by man – that is to say, from its very beginnings – it has been frustrated by its own intentions of discovering the truth’ (Horkheimer 1946: 176; my emphasis). Critical theory’s project, then, cannot be one of erasing instrumental reason, but of building self-conscious awareness of the nature and reach of such reason, and of its inadequacy as a guide to living a fully human life, at peace (as far as possible) with the natural world.

One might imagine that the work of critical theorists themselves amounts to testimony that properly critical theory is possible, but of course this would be naïve. How are critical theorists to be sure that they are not ‘spoken’ by the administered society, and that critical theory itself is not turned, in some diabolical twist, to instrumental advantage? Marcuse, for one, appears pessimistic when he suggests that no path to liberation can be advertised because, ‘The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future’ (Marcuse 1964: 257). In other words, the very nature of the critique of critical theory is such that we cannot take it at face value; we cannot be sure that we are not spoken (instrumentally) as we (try to) speak (substantively).

Indeed, of course, the overwhelming tone of critical theory in these respects is pessimistic. There is a strong sense that the nature of modern industrial society is such that radical change cannot be brought about. Critical theory cannot provide Greens with a sophisticated theory of social change because it gives us, instead, a sophisticated theory suggesting its impossibility.

But perhaps at this point Greens have more to say to critical theorists than the other way round. The latter’s pessimism is based on their belief that the human subject in modern society is condemned to follow the dictates of the system for reasons of survival within it. And the system itself, geared towards capital accumulation, tends towards ever-increasing rationalization and the ever-widening deployment of instrumental reason. Critical theorists cannot see this spiral being broken. Yet the green phenomenon is arguably itself an expression of an attempt to break the spiral in at least two significant directions.

First, the post-materialist aspects of green politics demonstrate the possibility of founding a politics in late-capitalist society based on a refusal of
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capital accumulation. If capital accumulation is what drives the spread of instrumental reason, then its refusal in green politics invites the suggestion that such a politics is itself an expression of the critical thinking that critical theorists believed to be increasingly impossible.

Second, green theorists’ determination to see the environment as having value in itself amounts to a resistance to the spread of instrumental reason. True, the green movement often seems divided against itself in this respect, with some sections suggesting that the non-human natural world needs to be defended in terms of its usefulness to human beings, while others argue for its intrinsic value. But the very fact that this latter view is advanced indicates the existence of a redoubt against the spread of instrumental reason, and, at the same time, holding such a view amounts to a substantive and subversive act of resistance.

CONCLUSIONS

I began this chapter with two hypotheses in respect of green politics and critical theory. The first was that useful comparisons might be drawn, and this has largely been borne out. The discrepancies between the two are instructive; critical theory tells Greens that we cannot go back in history, that human beings must be seen as apart from as well as a part of nature, and that we should place some faith in reason as salvation.

The significant thing about these conclusions is that they all point to a solution of the environmental crisis from within modernity. There has been some confusion as to whether the contemporary green movement is a modern movement, or a movement whose critique and aspirations take it outside modernity. This debate involves the need to clear up the confusion between modernity and modernization. Green politics has much more obviously called into question the modernizing strategies of ‘advanced industrial societies’ than it has the central tenets of modernity itself, although in respect of the latter, those who call (for example) for moves involving the re-enchantment of the natural world argue from within pre-modern parameters. Likewise, critical theory’s concern is with the dark side of modernization rather than with modernity as such, and its aspiration is the redemption of modernity’s promise rather than its abandonment. This is not the place to discuss whether critical theory is right in these respects, but if it is true to say that policies for environmental sustainability will emerge from modernity rather than in a complete break with it, then the critical-theoretical message is surely worth listening to.

The second hypothesis was that critical theory might provide a historical and material analysis of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, together, perhaps, with a non-Utopian resolution of the contemporary difficulties with this relationship. This has not been borne out. Throughout, critical theory’s stress is on the identification and practice of a new form of reason, without much of an indication of the material conditions

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required for it and even less on the strategies that might bring them about. In large measure, naturally, this reflects the status and aspirations of critical theory itself. Critical theory set out principally to analyse and explain the survivability of capitalism and it accomplished this task to the point at which capital accumulation seemed an untranscendable horizon. But perhaps, as I suggested above, green politics itself calls the bluff of critical theory. If so, and if it is to do so successfully, then the findings here suggest that it needs to concentrate fully on two themes which most conspicuously challenge late capitalism’s instrumentalized and administered society: post-materialism and the intrinsic value of the environment.

NOTE

1 Capra’s quotations are from Merchant (1980), p. 169.

BIBLIOGRAPHY