

Deep Ecology as Strategic Knowledge

A Letter to the Fifth Estate

Miss Ann Thropy

1989

Dear Fifth Estate:

As the author of "Population and AIDS"—the article that seems to have galvanized so much "anarchist" opposition to Earth First!—I can't help but attempt a brief response to George Bradford's wide-ranging critique of deep ecology in FE. Although it would be easy enough to get polemical about the rancor in Bradford's article, polemics are always a side show to the question at hand, which for deep ecology, at least, is the environmental crisis. What I'd like to do, then, is discuss the philosophic project of deep ecology, particularly as it pertains to population. For by misconstruing the former, Bradford misrepresents the latter.

From Bradford's perspective, the problem with deep ecology is its unacknowledged entanglement with the embedded ideologies of advanced capitalist society; an entanglement mystified by the presumptuous claim to a privileged, non-ideological ground for understanding nature. He makes the somewhat threadbare argument (after Skolimowski, et al) that "any vision of nature and humanity's place in it that is the product of human discourse is by definition going to be to some degree 'anthropocentric.'" Yes, whatever deep ecology says is perforce "anthropocentric" in a weak, self-evident sense, but it doesn't follow that such discourse places humanity at the center of its ethics—that is, "anthropocentrism" in its strong, substantive sense. As Warwick Fox points out in a recent edition of *The Trumpeter*, this kind of tautological accusation "confuses the inescapable fact of our human identity...with the entirely avoidable possibility of human chauvinism." And if we are truly concerned with change, not epistemological conundrums, only the substantive sense is relevant to the environmental debate. This crisis is, after all, not based on the trivial fact that anything a man believes is by definition a belief held by a man, but on the specific ideologies of civilization, which can be analyzed and resisted.

This is a telling misunderstanding on Bradford's part. It suggests a presupposition that deep ecology should be a "totalized" philosophy, along traditional metaphysical lines. Philosophy seeks to make transparent the ground of its own possibility (and, of course, the instability of these bases drives the history of philosophy forward). But deep ecology isn't a philosophy in this totalized sense. It isn't creating an ontology, epistemology, axiology, etc. to totally explain and envelop Being. Professor Devall, in particular, has emphasized how a deep ecology position can issue from a variety of religious and ethical sources. I don't presume to speak for all deep ecologists, but it seems to me that deep ecology seeks "strategic knowledge" (to use Foucault's phrase), knowledge based on our existence here and now in this society directed at resisting the structuring of nature and human nature that civilization enforces. It doesn't offer ultimate truth, but an ethics of resistance, a "negative ethics," which flows out of the threat of the environmental crisis.

Given the nature of this threat, deep ecology sees the necessity of "decentering" mankind, of showing that the groundless axiologies of civilization are alibis for the accumulation of power by particular groups. Bradford skillfully exposes the capitalist alibi. Unfortunately, he completely neglects, or rather participates in, a more fundamental one, no doubt because of its superficial differences with capitalism. He argues that there are enough "resources" for all five billion large mammals of the species *homo sapiens*, but these necessities of life are being misappro-

priated by capital. And he may be right—but only if we ignore the whole question of wilderness and the right of other species to exist. By representing Earth as a resource for human exploitation, he perpetuates the basic alibi civilization has used to accumulate power since its origin. He naturalizes this anthropocentrism by using the rich imagery of evolutionary science: just as it was natural for proto-mammals to hasten the extinction of dinosaurs, so too is it natural for humans to exterminate other species, destroy habitat, and exploit the Earth—as long as it's done by poor agricultural “anarchists” and not capitalists! This kind of mythic discourse masks the disjunction between natural selection, which always produces diversity and stability, and the accumulation of power that groups of humans deploy against the biosphere, and hence against our species' benefit, for their own benefit (even in the “benign” form of agricultural power).

In short, Bradford totalizes nature by following a representation of the world that civilization has always used as an alibi to accumulate power: the primacy of human welfare.

One can easily disprove the factual basis of this alibi (and FE has done its part over the years along these lines). But I only want to contrast Bradford's totalizing representation with deep ecology's negative ethics as applied to population. By defining the population problem only in terms of “human welfare” (how many people the Earth can feed), Bradford valorizes human life over its ecological context: wilderness. Any way you look at it, feeding today's population (generated as it was by medical and industrial technology), requires intensive agriculture, which precludes the existence of large wilderness and the process of natural selection therein. Bradford, then, identifies human welfare with a separation from wilderness; that is, the founding myth civilization uses to accumulate power. In contrast, in its role of resistance, deep ecology recognizes that putting wilderness ahead of human welfare is, paradoxically, the only effective way to promote human welfare—if we mean by the term the right to be free from the totalizing ideologies of civilization and the power-hungry groups they serve. Wilderness resists civilization's alibis; “human welfare” as a totalized value, as a telos, already belongs to them.

With this in mind, I'll go so far as to say that humanity became overpopulated the first time it picked up a plow and began its long, destructive trek to industrialism. It was the moment when representation was transformed into power formation. It is the lingering subtext to Bradford's outrage.

I welcome Bradford's critique of capitalism and technology as a step toward resistance and freedom. Unfortunately, he shrinks back at the idea that a critique of civilization's power relations must also include the relatively poor majority of humans, even though they elicit our compassion. Taking power from the gang of thugs who run this planet and giving it to the powerless (though it's something I for one would like to see, being powerless myself) won't solve the larger problem of power formations and their alibis. Only wilderness will do that, and therefore radical environmentalists follow strategies to preserve and expand wilderness, even if, as on the immigration issue, it coincidentally associates us with nationalism or other obnoxious ideologies.

Unless Bradford and other anarchists of the FE variety can accept this and recognize the role of wilderness in resisting civilization's power relations, any discussion between us will inevitably degenerate into fruitless attempts at conversion. An example of which, unfortunately, was Bradford's article.

Yours,

Miss Ann Thropy

Well, I wasn't brief after all. I hope you can use this anyway. By the way, in Bradford's article you incorrectly identified me as Dave—really, I sing much better than Foreman! A hint: I was the only EF!er Bradford had anything good to say about. I must be slipping. You can contact me through EF! Tucson (P.O. Box 5871, Tucson, AZ 85703) if you feel the urge.

Related

See response in “Return of the Son of Deep Ecology: The Ethics of Permanent Crisis and the Permanent Crisis in Ethics” by George Bradford, FE #331, Spring 1989

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