

The Dialectic of Enchantment

What Enchantment do we Seek?

John Clark

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According to a certain conventional wisdom, there has been an unfortunate disenchantment of the world, and what is desperately needed is that we rediscover and recreate an enchanted world. This is, however, at best a half truth, and perhaps even a dangerous one.

True, there is a battle between disenchantment and re-enchantment in which we must rally to the aid of enchantment. But there is also a war between contending forms of enchantment that already exist, here and now. This is the ultimate world-historical conflict that must engage our creative energies.

What is Enchantment?

The word “enchant” goes back to late Middle English and connoted “putting someone under a spell.” And, indeed, we might say that the key question of enchantment remains, “Which spell are we under?”

Delving even further into the origins of the word, we discover that it derives from the Latin *in* and *cantare*, “to sing.” This points us toward the existential question of enchantment. What songs are within you? What songs does your heart sing? What has inspired the music within your soul? In short, what has captured your imagination?

The question of enchantment is fundamentally the question of the imaginary.

Being Toward Birth

Through most of our existence, we humans have been enchanted most by one reality: The Earth. We have been enchanted by the sun, the moon, the stars, but, above all, by the Earth and Earthly phenomena. That is, what appears, emerges, comes into being, in and through the living Earth.

Our fundamental ontological question (question of being) has not been “Why is there being rather than nothing?” but, “How does being emerge out of the primordial creative Nothingness?” How does it become? It concerns the mystery of becoming. It concerns the mystery of creation, creativity, and creative forces, in short, the mystery of giving birth.

Humanity has from its beginning been entranced and enchanted by the phenomenon of birth, which is identical with the process of creation. Being-Enchanted is the most radical form of Being-Toward-Birth.

For the enchanted, Spring, the moment of rebirth, is the perennial model for revolution. Spring itself is not so much a season as a recurrent revolution.

There is some truth in the idea that the antithesis of linear history, which is associated with disenchantment, is cyclical history, which is associated with enchantment. But the secret of cyclical history is that the story always returns to the miraculous phenomenon of birth, the moment of creation.

The true antithesis of linear temporality is the moment of radical creativity and of giving birth.

The Creative Spirit

Indigenous people have been enchanted by what they call *The Creator* or *The Great Spirit*. These are other words for the Creative Spirit in Nature. It is what Chinese thought has for two and a half millennia called the *Dao*, the way of nature. The way of naturing.

When ancient Vedic sages pondered the mystery of the emergence of being out of Nothingness, they refused to offer nonsensical instrumental explanations. Rather, they said that world-creation is a form of *lila* or play. It makes little sense to ask why there is play rather than non-play. Play exists for its own sake, for the sake of enjoyment, which is the play itself.

They might have said that the universe, or the Spirit of Enchantment, had a song to sing, a song of many songs, the primordial Song, the Song before God, the Song before Man. The enchanted world, beginning with that primordial song, and continuing through all the songs of the Ten Thousand Things (Zhuangzi's "Music of the Earth") is the play of the world, in which everything constantly and mysteriously emerges out of the abyss of Nothingness.

We have been enchanted most by nature and art, by nature as artist and by the artist, that is, everyone, as a force of nature. (The greatest enchantment for the human being is the other enchanting human being). We have been enchanted by the coming-into-being of all life forms and the coming-into-being of all art forms. Enchantment has been all around and within us.

Disenchanted Domination

Much has been said about the disenchantment of the world. And modernity, which has swept away age-old enchantments has, indeed, constituted a process of disenchantment.

Early 20th century sociologist Max Weber, the great prophet and critic of disenchantment, said that it imposed an "intellectualization and rationalization" that deified knowledge, but failed to improve the "general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives." In fact, most denizens of the late modern technological wasteland are more mystified by their world than were the hunters, gatherers, and horticulturalists of the primordial wilderness.

Disenchantment, Weber says, dictates that all "mysterious incalculable forces" must be banished by a system of domination that seeks to "master all things by calculation." At least, this is the ideology promoted by positivistic science, techno-bureaucracy, the carceral system, and the most regressive, paleo-technic sectors of the military-industrial complex. So, yes, we have been living in an Age of Disenchantment. But as usual, it is what it isn't. In fact, in Late (End-Times) Capitalism it is primarily what it isn't.

Repressive Misenchancement

Enchantment never died. Far from it, it only mutated, and monstrated. In many ways, it has now become a much stranger and much stronger monster than ever before. The average consumer inhabits a world populated by myriad mysterious forces that enchant, allure, and entice. These are not the ancient forces of enchanted Nature and Spirit, but those arising from what Marx called "The Fetishism of Commodities," and what the Situationists labeled "The Spectacle."

As Marx explained a century and a half ago, the fetishized commodity becomes "a mysterious thing" that gains power "to rule the producers rather than being ruled by them." In short, we still live in an enchanted world, but it is the world of Enchantment, Inc. This world harnesses enchantment in order to intensify exploitation and domination. It becomes a misenchancement of bondage, a dysenchancement of unfreedom.

Thus, along with disenchantment have come conflicting forms of re-enchantment. The reigning form is an enchantment of denial and disavowal, of flight from our common world into a private hyper-enchanted micro-world, a world of spirits cut off from Spirit.

Revolutionary Re-enchantment

The other form is a re-enchantment that reconnects with the Creative Spirit in nature and in ourselves. This re-enchantment is part of a global revolution against the forces of disenchantment, dysenchantment, and disenchantment—against capitalism, the state, the technological megamachine and, on the level of the fundamental fantasy, against the psychotic patriarchal Superego in charge of it all.

We must allow the Earth to re-enchant itself through its primordial processes of poesis or radical creativity, and lila, or free play.

We participate in this re-enchantment by allowing ourselves to become an integral expression of Earth's creativity and play. By being both art and artist, player and play. We need to relearn this negative capability—without forgetting that it presupposes a positive capability to carry out revolutionary social transformation.

Unless we begin to take seriously the domination of enchantment, and begin to vanquish the enchantment of domination, we will never achieve the liberation of enchantment, or experience fully the enchantment of liberation.

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His recent books include *Between Earth and Empire: From the Necrocene to the Beloved Community* and *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism*. The former just appeared, and a new edition of the latter is forthcoming this winter, both from PM Press.



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