

Radical Ecology, Repressive Tolerance, and Zoöcide

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I don't like to call it a disaster...I am amazed at the publicity for the loss of a few birds.

– Fred L. Hartley, then President of Union Oil Company

In 1970, Earth Day largely marked the beginning of the modern environmental movement in the United States. Yet, a good case can be made that Earth Day itself, along with the sort of radical ecological politics now associated with groups like the Earth Liberation Front, erupted out of an event that took place the prior year. While drilling for oil six miles off the coast of Santa Barbara on the afternoon of January 28, 1969, Union Oil Company's equipment failures resulted in a natural gas blowout from the new deep-sea hole they were excavating. Though the gas leak was quickly capped, the resulting pressure build up produced five additional breaks along a nearby underwater fault line (hardly uncommon to California), sending oil and gas billowing into the surrounding ocean. Ultimately, it took the better part of twelve days to stop the main leaks, and some 3 million gallons of crude oil were released into an 800 square mile slick that contaminated the coastal waters, ruined 35 miles of shoreline, and damaged island ecologies. Amounting to a sort of Union Carbide disaster for non-human animals, over 10,000 birds, seals, dolphins, and other species were soon covered with tar, poisoned, or otherwise killed by chemical detergents used to break up the slick. Many more animals that did not die outright were adversely affected through destruction of their habitat, as the region became seriously polluted and took on the smell of the worst regulated oil refinery plant.

Santa Barbara's ecological catastrophe became a national media spectacle beamed into every American's television on the nightly news and, drawing on the nascent environmental consciousness sparked during the 1950s by Aldo Leopold's *Sand Country Almanac* and the 1960s by Rachel Carson's bestseller *Silent Spring*, public outrage erupted at the sort of governmental decision making that allowed Big Oil to cavalierly despoil the country for profit. It was revealed that oil companies had corrupted the U.S. Geological Survey, whose job it was to oversee the granting of offshore land leases and that such leases were routinely granted with little investigation as to their salience, save for that conducted by petroleum corporations themselves (whose data was private and could not be made a matter of public record). Further, corruption also flowed from President Johnson's administration on down, as the Vietnam war was proving overly costly and so a policy of producing additional federal revenues from the selling off of natural resources (even at pennies on the dollar) was enacted in order to manufacture the illusion of budgetary economic soundness on part of the country. As a result, the Santa Barbara channel had been auctioned off at the nice price of \$602 million, providing the green light for oil companies to do with it as they willed, as a former proposal to turn the area into a wildlife sanctuary was quietly dropped from the agenda.

Clearly, no one in power had ever stopped to question what the political effects of a giant slick in the Santa Barbara channel would be. A place of natural beauty that had been fighting as a community since the 19th century against the battleship-sized drill

platforms stationed obtrusively on the horizon line, Santa Barbara was already mobilized on the issue. In the days following the spill, GOO (standing for Get Oil Out!) was created and it served as an organization to lead activist campaigns for reducing driving time, staging gas station boycotts, and burning oil company credit cards. Further, Santa Barbara was a city of wealth and intelligence. A home to many people with insider connections to alter the usual workings of the status-quo, their pressure led to two major national policy changes: the enacting of a federal moratorium on leases for new offshore drilling (except in huge swathes of the Gulf of Mexico) and the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA), the Magna Carta of environmental legislation in the United States. Finally, Santa Barbara was also a university town that was a hotbed of 1960s youth activism and counterculture.

The community of Isla Vista, in particular, was known for its radicalism in opposing police repression, staging war resistance, and defending leftist UCSB professors who were being denied tenure and removed from their posts. In 1970, Isla Vista militants responded with their own reply to the corporate energy cum military State by breaking into and razing the local branch of the Bank of America to the ground. The bank made a perfect target for many reasons. On the one hand, the bank was *the* community representative of capitalist business and, whether in its opposition to Cesar Chavez's grape boycott or its support for American imperialism (and hence the Vietnam war) through its opening up of branches in Saigon and Bangkok, Bank of America was seen as corrosive to the community's social justice values. But there is a less well-known, though equally important, reason that the bank was targeted. Bank of America directors were also known to sit on the board of Union Oil and so were themselves seen as responsible for the terrible oil spill of 1969.

In this context, though the Earth Liberation Front's first arson campaigns are dated to 1997 in the US, the torching of Isla Vista's Bank of America stands as one of the very first acts of uncompromising direct action in United States' revolutionary environmentalism and thereby shows that radical ecological approaches to politics co-originated with the mainstream environmental movement. Unlike the mainstream, however, Isla Vista New Left radicals tethered their ecological sensibility to an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist stance that further demanded a qualitative and revolutionary change in social and cultural relations.

Returning to the Question of Social Intolerance

Civil disobedience has many permutations.

You can block the streets in front of the United Nations.

You can lay down on the tracks, keep the nuke trains out of town,

Or you can pour gas on the condo and you can burn it down.

– David Rovics, Song for the Earth Liberation Front

While there are dramatic differences between the political and cultural scene of the 1960s and the present, in many ways it seems like old times. Oil is again the center of political discussions as the Bush administration is hunkered down in a costly and apparently unwinnable Vietnam of its own making in Iraq. While Bush has promised to honor his father's extension of the federal moratorium on offshore drilling until 2012, Big Oil has

been working vigorously to gain access to the continental shelf, amongst other potential exploration sites. As of the time of this writing, having failed at an attempt at complete repeal of the moratorium in the House, oil lobbyists are grafting an inclusion onto Bush's 2006 Energy Plan that will allow states the right to lease offshore land to help pad their budgets in a dwindling economy, thereby keeping incumbent politicians employed. Further, NEPA itself – the law created to make sure federal agencies properly account for potential environmental impacts prior to developing federal lands – has come under an all-out assault as the Bush administration seeks to free industries from what it deems to be a time-consuming and expensive legislative regulatory procedure. This as a 2005 “mystery spill,” unclaimed by any oil company (go figure), once again painted Santa Barbara beaches black and killed some 5,000 birds and other animals, making it one of the worst oil disasters of recent memory.

Yet, three and a half decades have also brought startling changes. Whereas 1969's spill both radicalized students into taking direct action against anti-ecological capitalism and galvanized a national environmental movement in the mainstream, 2005's oil slick passed by relatively unnoticed. One might argue that in the present age of mega-spectacle, nothing short of global warming as fictively pictured in the absurd movie *The Day After Tomorrow* has enough emotional punch to break through the exhausted sensibilities of the oblivious masses. In this sense, the relatively rare devastation wrought by a killer tsunami rouses widespread attention today, as the public passes by news about the toxic burdens brought to bear upon life by corporate and state malfeasance with little more than a bored shrug and, perhaps, a blog post. For sure, since the Battle for Seattle the United States has seen a reinvention of public protest, and while people continue to link images of the Sixties with notions of social discontent, the recent events of February 15, 2003 and the 2004 Republican convention in New York City demonstrated dissent on a scale far beyond that ever mustered by the flower-power youth of yesteryear. Still, why then did the counterculture of the 1960s seemingly accomplish so much while the contemporary Left has largely suffered being overrun, consolidated, and ignored despite its large numbers?

The answer requires reconsidering the past. As Steven Best has noted in *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?*, post-9/11 the United States has been engaged in a McCarthyesque crackdown on activists by brandishing them as terrorists, as corporations and the government laughingly intone support for treasured words like “freedom” and “democracy.” The State portrays itself as a security apparatus in charge of preserving the liberal ideal of tolerance, while it uses the extremism of groups like the Al Qaeda to smear all of its enemies with charges of tyrannical fundamentalism. Thus, animal activists like the SHAC7 are described as anti-democratic enemies of the State because of their willingness to directly challenge and attempt to shut down the self-imposed rights of corporations to cavalierly murder animals in the name of science and business, while SHAC's opponents regularly promote themselves as “good citizens” who recognize the right to voice even the most unpopular opinions as long as those opinions do not step beyond the bounds of free speech into, as they see it, “intimidation.”

Herbert Marcuse, the so-called the “father of the New Left” during the 1960s, wrote an important essay during that period, “Repressive Tolerance,” in which he examined this process by which the liberal State and its corporate members assert that they are fit models of democratic tolerance, as they insist that radical activists are

subversive of the very ideals on which our society is based. In this essay, Marcuse notes that the claim that democratic tolerance requires activists to restrict their protests to legal street demonstrations and intra-governmental attempts to change policy is highly spurious. Tolerance, he says, arose as a political concept to protect the oppressed and minority viewpoints from being met with repressive violence from the ruling classes. However, when the call for tolerance is accordingly used by the ruling classes to protect themselves from interventions that seek to limit global violence and suppression, fear, and misery, it amounts to a perversion of tolerance that works to repress instead of liberate. Thusly, Marcuse thought such tolerance deserves to be met, without compromise, by acts of revolutionary intolerance because capitalistic societies such as the United States manage to distort the very meanings of peace and truth by claiming that tolerance must be extended throughout the society by the weak to the violence and falsity produced by the strong.

Many have criticized Marcuse for advocating violence against the system in order to quash the system's inherent violence, however, the critique of repressive tolerance is key to understanding why revolutionary violence would remain – if not ethical – a non-contradictory and essential mode of political challenge. For a tolerance that defends life must be committed to opposing the overwhelming violence wrought by the military, corporations, and the State as the manifestation of their power, and it is, by definition, to fail to work for their overthrow when one actively or passively tolerates them. Therefore, Marcuse felt that revolutionary violence may in fact be necessary to move beyond political acts that either consciously or unconsciously side with, and thereby strengthen, the social agenda of the ruling classes. Further, he noted that the tremendous amount of concern (even amongst the Left) evoked as to whether revolutionary violence is a just tactic fails to correlate to how often it is actually applied and practiced. Meanwhile, systemic violence constantly goes on everywhere either unnoticed and unchecked or celebrated outright. This goes to show, Marcuse felt, how hard it is to even think beyond the parameters set by repressive tolerance in a society such as our own and this serves as yet another reason why such tolerance must, by any means necessary, be met with social intolerance.

Yet, Marcuse also recognized a wide-range of tactics such as marching long-term through the institutions and grabbing positions of power wherever possible, if they were undertaken with a revolutionary thrust towards a more ecologically-sound, peaceful, and free planet. Largely forgotten, in this respect, is his concept of the “Great Refusal,” that meant the cultural rejection *en toto* of the mainstream in favor of life lived in defense of a better world. This idea gripped the counterculture of the 1960s, who set out to create a plethora of new cultural forms and institutions (such as the environmental movement) across the whole spectrum of society. Certainly, there are also bold new cultural forays in today's radical ecological politics. Increasingly, individuals and countercultural collectives are attempting to reject the mega-war-machine of the mainstream, as they take up veganism, permaculture, and other alternative lifestyles such as the Straight-Edge movement that mixes urban punk stylings with a commitment to self-control, clean living, and political expressions like animal rights. Additionally, anarchistic events such as the Total Liberation tour travel the country, and hardly an urban setting can be found that is free of some form of regular culture jam. But as today's popular culture seems dominated by media spectacle and all manner of mass-commodified technological

gadgetry unlike ever before, eco-radicals must work harder still to distinguish the ways in which their culture represents a positive realization of anti-oppressive norms based on ideals of sustainability and not just a nihilistic disapproval of a society rightly deemed unredeemable. That is: a politics of burning down that lacks a correlative social and cultural reconstructive focus should not itself be tolerated.

Reinventing a Pro-Life Politics

...be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless.
Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.
– Chief Seattle

George W. Bush has been characterized as a pro-life leader for his desire to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, ban stem cell research, and stop funding for international aid organizations that offer counsel on abortions and provide contraceptives. Of course, in his role as outright war maker in Afghanistan and Iraq, indirect war maker through his global neoliberal structural adjustment policies, and ecological war maker as the worst environmental president in United States history, Bush is anything but pro-life. Rather, as the sort of über-representative of the affluent society, its forces, and its values, Bush is a fitting figurehead for a politics of mass-extinction, global poverty, and ecological catastrophe. But, let us make no mistake about it, death-dealing politics such as Bush's extends far beyond the ideological confines of his neo-conservative administration and so, from a perspective of radical ecology, strategies such as the "Anybody But Bush" that progressives attempted to use during the 2004 election cycle could not be more misguided.

Since the first Earth Day, we have witnessed a form of "endless growth" political economy that is literally over-producing and consuming the planet towards death. Wholly without precedent, the human population has nearly doubled during this time period, increasing by 2.5 billion people. Similarly, markets have continued to worship the gods of speed and quantity and refused to conserve. The use and extraction of non-renewable energy resources like oil, coal, and natural gas has followed and exceeded the trends set by the population curve despite many years of warnings about the consequences inherent in their over-use and extraction, and this has led to a corresponding increase in the carbon emissions known to be responsible for global warming. Likewise, living beings and organic habitats are being culled and destroyed in the name of human consumption at staggering rates. Tree consumption for paper products has doubled over the last thirty years, resulting in about half of the planet's forests disappearing, while throughout the oceans, global fishing also has doubled resulting in a recent report finding that approximately 90% of the major fish species in the world's oceans have disappeared. Mile-long nets used to trawl the ocean bottoms for commercial fishing enterprises are drowning and killing about 1000 whales, dolphins, and porpoises daily, some of the species near extinction from centuries of commercial hunting. Further, since the end of the 1960s, half of the planet's wetlands have either been filled or drained for development, and nearly half of the Earth's soils have been agriculturally degraded so as not to support life. Finally, as giant corporate agribusinesses have consumed the family farm and as fast food has exploded from being a cultural novelty to a totalizing cultural

staple across the world, vast, unimaginable slaughterhouses – brutal production-lines in which thousands of animals are murdered for meat harvesting every hour – have also become the business standard.

Marcuse himself referred to the sort of systemic disregard for life evinced by statistics such as these as “ecocide” – the attempt to annihilate natural places by turning them into capitalist cultural spaces, a process that works hand in hand with the genocide and de-humanization of people as an expression of the market economy’s perpetual expansion. More recently, others speak of ecocide as the destruction of the higher-order relations that govern ecosystems generally, as when economies of need take areas characterized by complexity and diversity like the Amazonian rainforest and reduce them to the de-forested and unstable monoculture of soybeans for cattle-feed. However, while it is no doubt possible to disable an ecosystem from sustaining much life, it is not clear that one can actually kill it. Instead, we are witnessing a process by which bioregions are being transformed pathologically from natural ecologies of scale that support life to capitalist ecologies that function beyond limit and threaten death. In this way, the current globalization of capitalism that institutes classist, racist, sexist, and speciesist oppression is a sort of biocidal agent.

It is biocidal, also, in a more philosophical sense. The term “*bios*” is a Greek word that has come to designate natural life as studied by the science of biology. Originally, though, *bios* meant a sort of characterized life – as in a “biography” – that is demonstrated by the active subjectivity of sentient beings. In this manner, organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have as their ultimate goal the social recognition of animals’ *bios* and, accordingly, want them to be afforded the status of being considered subjects of a life that are therefore deserving of rights. When compared with the larger socio-political context against which PETA struggles, however, the McDonaldsization of the planet is obviously moving in the opposite direction. Most beings today, including the great Earth and the sustaining cosmos beyond, are instead increasingly reduced to one-dimensional objects for exploitation, and should they provide too much resistance to the schemes of profit and power in the process, they are tagged for systematic removal.

In stark contrast to the objectification of life that typifies mainstream culture in the United States, as well as to the sense of life as “characterized” that is represented by the idea of *bios*, the Greeks (in a manner similar to many indigenous cultures) held that life was fundamentally *zoë* – a multidimensional and multiplicitous realm of indestructible being. Thus, in Greek culture primeval and natural places were consecrated to the pagan deity Pan (whose name means “all”), and these were held to be sacred groves where *zoë* was especially concentrated in its power. The final point, then, is that ruling class politics are also zoöcidal, though not in the sense that it kills *zoë* (which cannot be killed by definition). Rather, in instituting a transnational network of murderous profanity over the sacred, in paving paradise in order to put up a parking lot, capitalist life is zoöcidal in that it seeks to colonize any and all spaces in which cultures based on understandings and reverence for *zoë* can thrive.

The call, therefore, to future radicals is clear. They must, if they are not doing so already, integrate the ecological critique into their politics and culture and so become ecological radicals. Further, ecological radicals – a terminology, though in many senses synonymous, which I prefer to “revolutionary environmentalists” must themselves

increasingly move to develop cultural relationships to nature that exhibit the sort of positive liberatory values that have emerged out of a long history of social struggle. Of course, eco-radicals will also have to learn, grow, and ultimately teach, the values and practices that unfold a new sensibility towards life that emerges from the attempt to liberate the Earth proper. In this respect, perhaps, the reinvention of a pro-life politics in which human and non-human beings are understood as both *bios* and *zoë* represents for us the great anti-capitalist challenge of the present historical moment.