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The Sociology of the Environment Volume II

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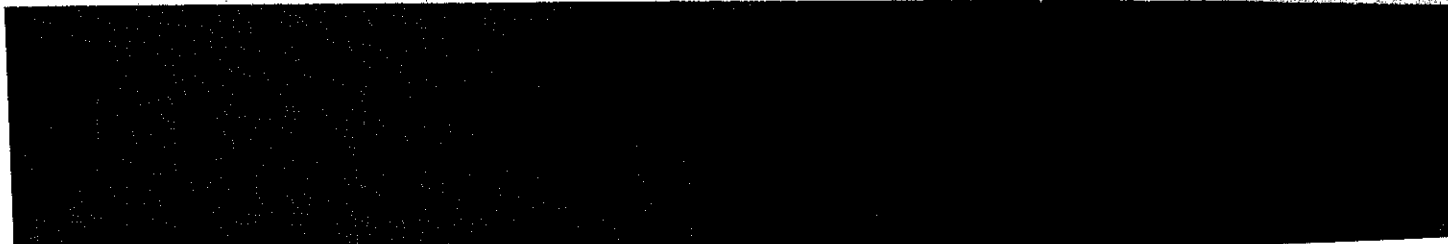
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CONCLUSION: THE RADICAL ECOLOGY MOVEMENT

What has the radical ecology movement accomplished? A broad range of answers to this question is possible. Radical ecology has not brought about a worldwide socialist order. Nor is such a scenario likely in the immediate future. Its achievements are far more modest. As a theoretical critique of the mainstream environmental movement, it exposes social and scientific assumptions underlying environmentalists' analyses. As a movement, it raises public consciousness concerning the dangers to human health and to nonhuman nature of maintaining the status quo. In so doing, it pushes mainstream society toward greater equality and social justice. It offers an alternative vision of the

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RADICAL ECOLOGY

world in which race, class, sex, and age barriers have been eliminated and basic human needs have been fulfilled.

What analyses and concrete results have radical theorists and activists contributed to the environmental movement?

CONTRIBUTIONS OF RADICAL THEORISTS

- Reality is a totality of internally related parts. The relationships are fundamental and continually shape the totality as contradictions and conflicts arise and are resolved.
- Social reality has structural (ecological and economic) and superstructural (law, politics, science, and religion) features. Continual change is generated out of the contradictions and interactions among the parts and levels.
- Science is not a process of discovering ultimate truths of nature, but a social construction that changes over time. The assumptions accepted by its practitioners are value-laden and reflect their places in both history and society, as well as the research priorities and funding sources of those in power.
- Ecology is likewise a socially constructed science whose basic assumptions and conclusions change in accordance with social priorities and socially accepted metaphors.
- What counts as a natural resource is historically contingent and is dependent on a particular cultural and economic system in a given place and time.
- Surplus and scarcity are produced by economic interactions with non-human nature. Scarcity is both real in that some resources are non-renewable over human lifespans and created in that economic producers control the technologies of extraction and the distribution of commodities.
- Human reproduction is not determined by indiscriminate sexual passions, but is governed by cultural norms and practices.
- Gender is created not only by biology, but by social practices.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF RADICAL ACTIVISTS

- The dangers of radioactive, toxic, and hazardous wastes to human health and reproduction have been exposed by citizen activists and regulations concerning disposal have been tightened.

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CONCLUSION

- The siting of incinerators and landfills in poor and minority communities and Third World countries has been exposed as racist.
- The rapid clearcutting of tropical rainforests and northern hemisphere old growth forests by corporations on both public and private lands and the associated decimation of rare and endangered species have been brought to public awareness, and cutting in some areas has been curtailed.
- The slaughter of whales, dolphins, salmon, and other ocean species has been sharply criticized and in some cases curtailed or temporarily reduced.
- The dangers of pesticides and herbicides on foods and in water supplies and the availability of alternative systems of agriculture have been made visible.
- The viability of green parties as a source of political power has been recognized.
- The self-determination and power of indigenous peoples throughout the world to the right to control their own natural resources has become important.
- Direct, nonviolent action has become an acceptable and highly visible means of political protest.
- Alternative, nonpatriarchal forms of spirituality and alternative pathways within mainstream religions that view people as caretakers and/or equal parts of nature rather than dominators are being adopted by more and more people.
- The need for ecological education and individual commitment to alternative lifestyles that reduce conspicuous consumption and recycle resources is making headway.

While radical ecology has achieved specific gains and visibility, it nonetheless has its own limitations and internal contradictions. Radical ecology lacks coherence as a theory and as a movement. Theoreticians are deeply divided as to underlying ethical, economic, social, and scientific assumptions. Some deep ecologists wish to focus on redefining the meaning of self, others on redefining science and cosmology, still others on the connections between spirituality and deep ecology. Social ecologists and deep ecologists are at odds as to whether the priority lies with challenging and redefining the dominant worldview as the mode for initiating transformation or whether the preeminent strategy lies in the pursuit of social justice, with each camp accusing the other of lack of sophistication. Some social ecologists disdain

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spiritual ecology as politically naive and as diverting energy away from social change, while many spiritual ecologists defend ritual as a way of focusing social actions. Ethically the camps are also in disagreement, with many deep ecologists and spiritual ecologists holding some form of ecocentric ethic, while social ecologists generally pursue a homocentric approach informed by ecological principles. Although the theoretical debates among proponents of radical ecology in general are often vituperative, they are equally incisive and healthy as a forum for clarification of assumptions and principles.

Similarly, green movements are divided along both theoretical and strategic lines. Green politics is fraught with disagreements between those who hold deep ecological and/or spiritual ecological assumptions and those who identify with social ecology and hold an ethic of social justice as the primary objective. Equally significant are the divisions between Greens who wish to pursue a practical real-world strategy of working with other political parties to achieve ecological goals and Greens who refuse to compromise fundamental movement principles and prefer to work outside the established political system. Ecofeminists are often critical of deep ecologists for their failure to recognize both biological and socially constructed differences, and divided among themselves as to basic strategies for change, with some pressing for spiritual, others for social approaches, and still others seeking to combine ritual with action. Similarly the sustainability movement is divided among those who primarily follow scientific/ecological principles in advocating policy and those who incorporate or subordinate scientific strategies to social justice strategies.

Radical environmental movements also differ in different parts of the world. In the First World, much energy is directed toward mitigating the effects of toxic pollutants (e.g. chlorofluorocarbons, petroleum spills, PCBs, pesticides, and nuclear and hazardous wastes), preserving endangered species, saving wilderness, and promoting recycling. In the Second World, priorities are focused on controlling industrial threats to human health, particularly the effects of urban air and water pollution as well as nuclear contamination resulting from the Chernobyl accident. In the Third World a primary emphasis is on obtaining sufficient food, clean water, and adequate clothing for basic subsistence, devel-

CONCLUSION

oping appropriate technologies for cooking, heating, and farming, countering the effects of pesticide poisoning on human health, and preserving the lands of indigenous peoples.

Yet just as the environmental and human health problems facing the three worlds are interdependent, so radical movements are linked. When toxic substances and pharmaceuticals are banned in the First World, they are often dumped in Third World countries. Radical movements expose and protest against such practices. When rainforests are cut in Third World countries, destroying indigenous habitats, First World environmental groups organize consumer boycotts of timbers and hamburgers. When Second World activists organize environmental protests, they receive support and assistance from First World activists. International environmental conferences produce international networks of groups helping other groups.

Within the First, Second, and Third World radical ecology movements, theory and practice are linked, each informing and inseparable from the other. Divisions among proponents open new avenues for both synthesis and criticism. The movement as a whole is both dynamic and timely. New ideas and new strategies for change are continually evolving; the door is always open to new people with energy and enthusiasm.

I have organized the preceding chapters around a framework that uses the concepts of ecology, production, reproduction, and consciousness in understanding both the ecological crisis and ways of overcoming it. I have analyzed the crisis a result of two contradictions, the first between production and ecology, the second between production and reproduction (see Introduction and Chapter 1). As these contradictions deepen, they push the world into greater ecological stress. The crisis could be relieved over the next several decades, however, through a global ecological revolution brought about by changes in production, reproduction, and consciousness that lead to ecological sustainability. Thus deep ecologists call for a transformation in consciousness from a mechanistic to an ecological worldview which transforms knowing, being, ethics, psychology, religion, and science, while spiritual ecologists focus on religion and ritual as ways of revering nature. Social ecologists call for a transformation in political economy based on

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new ecologically sustainable modes of production and new democratic modes of political reproduction.

Radical ecological movements attempt to resolve the contradictions that lead to the crisis through action. Green politics address the contradiction between production and reproduction, pressing for ways of reproducing human and nonhuman life that are compatible with ecosystem health and social justice. Ecofeminists press for gender equality and the subordination of production to the reproduction of life such that children will be born into societies that can provide adequate employment and security and have an ethic of nurturing both humans and nature. The sustainability movement focuses on the contradiction between ecology and production, devising ecologically-sustainable production technologies, restoring ecosystems, and promoting socially-just development programs.

Despite the accomplishments and vision of radical ecologists, however, most of the world's power is presently concentrated in economic systems and political institutions that bring about environmental deterioration. The trends that split rich from poor, whites from people of color, men from women, and humans from nature remain. Radical ecology itself stands outside the dominant political, economic, and scientific world order. Together its various strands and actions challenge the hegemony of the dominant order. Because environmental problems promise to be among the most critical issues facing the twenty-first century, environmentalists will play increasingly important roles in their resolution. Radical ecology and its movements will continue to challenge mainstream environmentalism and will remain on the cutting edge of social transformation, contributing thought and action to the search for a livable world.