The Left nowadays loves the green movement, but isn’t nearly so sure about postmodernism. That’s odd, thinks McKenzie Wark, because the two have more in common than is often imagined.

Nowadays, when most people hear the word postmodern they probably reach for the remote control to flip channels as fast as possible. But please indulge me here, because I want to argue that it is a buzzword on which the battery hasn’t entirely gone flat, as it gives us a handle on the rise of the green movement.

What does green politics have to do with postmodernism? What do either have to do with the traditional interests and concerns of the left? In the case of a lot of green politics, quite a lot it would seem. Most of the Left has rushed to annex most of the green politics which have sprung up around it on the grounds that the Left has always been concerned about the environment and can stake some claim to have had a hand in nurturing the nascent green movement for many years before its current flowering.

On the other hand, many on the Left take great pains to distance themselves from anything remotely ‘postmodern’. I can remember hysterical tirades against postmodernism from the floor of the first conference of Socialist Scholars held in Sydney a year ago. Postmodernism seemed to have become at that moment the great fearful ‘other’ of that distinctively leftist kind of paranoia. This kind of paranoia might be justified when the enemy one fears and attacks is unchecked capitalism, the casual violence of bureaucracies, patriarchal violence, or any more of a number of solid traditional Left fears and hates. But postmodernism? How does a vaguely-defined style of architecture, philosophy and video clip decor add up to something as fearful as all that?

The reason for the hysterical reaction to postmodernism by the Left seems to me to stem from the fact that postmodernism is a genuine outgrowth of leftist thinking, one which got more than a bit out of control. Postmodernism, like the green movement, has some things which it holds in con-
mon with the Left, and some which it doesn’t. The difference is that while the Left wants to claim more of the green movement than it can comfortably accommodate, it wants to hack out postmodern thinking root and branch.

On the face of it, this looks sensible. Environmentalism is good, solid, morally sound stuff. Real politics. Even, if you can pardon the often unacknowledged pun, a grassroots movement. On the other hand, postmodernism is a bunch of academics, artists, media brats and pop musicians doing weird things with ideas no-one understands, cultural technologies everyone is afraid of or insidious Yank pop culture. A very mixed bag, but all of it bad. What seems to have escaped attention until now is that these seemingly polar opposite aspects of contemporary culture and politics might actually be deeply related to each other. Even, as we used to say, ‘dialectically’ implied in each other. This is the idea I want to develop here.

The influence of green politics is broad but shallow

Postmodernism appears as a set of descriptions of surface details which are either celebrated or denounced, depending on one’s taste—and often it is little more than taste that is involved. Yet these surface details seem to me to point to something quite fundamental. Capitalism is an open-ended system, a ‘perpetuum mobile’, as Marx called it. It constantly develops new forces, not only of production but of communication as well. If the postmodern amounts to anything much, it is an intuition that the development of the vectors of communication has not only led to a quantitative increase in the volume and velocity of information in circulation, but it has also had qualitative effects on culture itself. Increasingly, everyday experience, historical memory, world events, subcultural or ethnic identities and all mediated through a vast and global network of media technologies everyone is afraid of or insidious Yank pop culture. A very mixed bag, but all of it bad. What seems to have escaped attention until now is that these seemingly polar opposite aspects of contemporary culture and politics might actually be deeply related to each other. Even, as we used to say, ‘dialectically’ implied in each other. This is the idea I want to develop here.

I’ll give an example. As the last federal election showed the influence of green politics and culture on public opinion is broad but shallow. Many, many people feel instinctively that the green perspective is fundamentally right. They might not have a clear idea how the whole shebang comes together, but they know something is rotten in the state of the world. They feel strongly about the destruction of rainforests, the termination of whole species, especially cuddly ones, and even more strongly about things which affect them personally, like the quality of air and water. They may not be prepared to sacrifice either of the family cars yet, but they’re beginning to feel guilty enough to buy the unbleached toilet paper they saw on TV.

This last is the crucial determinant here: people react to green issues because they have seen them on TV. The green movement has had influence out of all proportion to its actual organisational size, in large part because of television. This comes in part from a conscious use of TV politics. Taking a few pages out of Saul Alinsky and the yippies’ training manuals, a number of green movements have developed a highly effective form of direct action which does not always directly stop the bastards from bulldozing everything in sight on the ground but which gets hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions, of people thinking that the greens are probably right—and all through directly invading the terrain of television.

Sometimes they don’t even have to organise meticulously planned and heroic actions to produce this effect. An oil tanker or a nuclear power plant cracking up is a propaganda coup all on its own. Incremental erosion of our conditions of life has very little effect on how people think. Someone once told me that you can put a frog in a pot of water on the stove and that, if you raise the temperature in the pot slowly enough, the frog simply adjusts its body to the temperature change as if it’s normal until, toad/Boiled frog. I think this is exactly the effect that the idea of a football field worth of rainforest disappearing every second has on people. We can listen to stuff like that until we’re boiled frogs. A good, violent disaster, on the other hand, makes sense.

The third source of green consciousness in popular culture is fictional narrative and documentaries. I lump these together because I think their effect is much the same. When they work, they tell a story which people can relate to, get angry about, but not feel powerlessness about as a result. The great critical theorist Theodor Adorno once said that the most important thing is not to let the power of others, or our own powerlessness, stupefy us. He said that in the context of World War Two and the holocaust, but it is more true today. The dark side of the enlightenment Adorno feared is alive and well. It dominates nature and people alike with its technologies of extraction and control. Yet a well-aimed narrative like The Emerald Forest or Silkwood or The China Syndrome can make you feel not only that something is wrong but that something can be done.

In sum, the green movement is effective because it touches people’s vital interests and attacks forms of power that are demonstrably wrong. This is why very small organisations have had such an enormous effect on popular consciousness. Yet the means through which it has its effects have been—shock, horror—thoroughly postmodern. The green movement is a postmodern movement in that it relies for its effects on its power within the sphere of popular media culture.

It may be argued that the green movement is ‘really’ a small, dedicated band of people organised in grassroots organisations. This is indeed true, but such organisations only produce effects because they are taken up in the media sphere. Whereas most powerful forces occupy space in the media in proportion to their organisational power and size, the greens do it through the staging of spectacular events.
through the telling of effective stories and through the knock-on effects of the inevitable disasters caused by the kind of insane exploitation of people and nature that passes for civilisation.

Hence, to understand green politics and to practise it effectively, we need to understand the workings of the terrain on which it draws mass support and legitimacy. This might also help in the struggle against the co-option of the motifs and images thrown off by the interaction of green politics and popular consciousness by business interests.

'Greenness' seems like nothing more than a kind of product differentiation strategy nowadays. You can bet they've got it worked out in clever demographics. They've still got those old fashioned brands of soap which are proudly part of industrial culture for consumers belonging to demographic groups still too tied to industrial culture to switch. Then there are the younger, better educated ones for whom everything from soap to disposable packaging is now, by some miraculous perversion of the language, 'environmentally friendly'.

Just as in the 60s, every image and slogan which is charged with political meaning, arising out of events and struggles and recorded in popular memory, ends up as a jingle. As John Berger noted 20 years ago, 'revolution' became a way to sell panty-hose. 'Freedom' was somehow steered away from association with, say, civil rights and connected up via expensive marketing to flared jeans and roll-your-own tobacco. Greenness will, likewise, become a commodified parody of itself, unless green politics keeps up the media side of its game and plays these postmodern games as well, if not better, than the enemy.

The only way to avoid the complete co-option of a politically charged vocabulary and image-repertoire is to keep moving, keep making it up, keep varying the themes and styles, and to avoid any kind of fundamentalism which can become doctrinaire or too easily have its more popular persistence. This is why the left needs to understand the workings of the terrain of communication. The more of them that green politics can be wrapped in, the better.

Political struggle these days is connected closely to what Stuart Hall has called the struggle for cultural leadership. The old forms of progressive political organisation have not done terribly well in this struggle in recent times, but fortunately there has been a massive influx into the culture industries of people both talented and ideologically street-smart. Now there is no way that the diverse and pluralistic impulses of the progressive forces in the culture industries are ever going to be organised into any kind of party or movement. Those are structural ideas from a pre-media age, when organisations had a proportionally far greater effect on popular consciousness than they do today. In any case, being bound to a dogma and obliged to turn up to branch meetings strikes most people today as the most fundamentally useless form of political action imaginable. Thus new ways of tapping into the power, skill and goodwill of the culture industries is a fundamental task for making the little skeleton staffs which actually operate movements and organisations today effective. It is also the only way to make them answerable, via the feedback loop of the media, to genuine popular opinion.

I've said a lot about what the green movement 'should do' and 'shouldn't do'. Armchair talk, to be sure, but meant as part of a dialogue. Or rather, a transplanting of the dialogue that is already well under way about the future of both 'red' and 'green' politics out of the old terrain of organisational deckchair-shuffling onto the terrain of communication. I don't really care how many new parties and movements there are, all with their own offices and meetings and standing orders. I wish them all well. What I think matters just as much is a politics on another terrain altogether, the mediated terrain of postmodern culture.

Survival in a media ecology poisoned by the holding companies is vital for the green movement, if you will pardon the irony. We too might end up extinct if we don't keep innovating and diversifying. As much as the postmodern might appear distasteful, as an unwelcome change of the ground rules we were all getting so comfortable with, one can't just argue these changes away. They have to be confronted in reality, in forms of political action and cultural persistence. This is why the Left needs to understand the postmodern as a description of rapidly changing socio-historical dynamics as much as it needs to grasp the significance of the green movement as a critique of one of the fundamental aspects of that dynamic gone wrong.

This association of a significant and world-historical movement with a bunch of long-haired pop cliches can only be harmful, making green politics an easy target for the media monopolies. Why not develop a more diverse and sophisticated linkage of green issues with a much more widespread range of cultural styles? Cultural styles are the modes through which loose and fuzzy sets of otherwise quite alienated people make contact and community with each other in a postmodern media culture. The more of them that green politics can be wrapped in, the better.

From the point of view I'm outlining now, the organisational form of green politics is only part of the picture, and in the long run not as important as its media politics. The cultural aspect of green politics seems to me more important, but the limitation here is a repetitiveness adherence to well-worn cultural styles. By some historic accident, a whole bunch of pop cultural images and styles put in circulation in the late 60s are still being recycled as the cultural wrapping of green politics, as if it were somehow an authentic expression of that politics.

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