McKenzie Wark responds to Peter Christoff’s criticism of ‘Postmodern Greens’. 

I’m delighted with Peter Christoff’s spirited response to my article on the green movement and postmodern culture.

His response raises two interesting issues. The first concerns the nature of contemporary culture and the way ideas, stories and images move around in it. The second question flows from any provisional answer to the first: how does this affect political activism? What specific organisations and cultural forms work best in the particular cultural matrix of the times?

I am using ‘culture’ in a wide sense here to mean the form taken by any and every social relationship. This question of definitions is important because it is really the source of Christoff’s disagreement with my article. My argument is basically that everyday experience is saturated with media images and forms. Christoff thinks I am saying “that everyday experience is supplanted by mediated forms”, and here he is wrong.

Hairsplitting? Maybe. But these terms and metaphors affect our whole perception of the way society fits together and how we can act in it. Christoff’s image of the relationship of “mediated culture” to “lived experience” is a top-bottom one. Lived experience has “deep psychological undertows and cross currents” not to mention “foundations”. Lived experience, moreover, is the “basis” of environmental awareness. These are his metaphors—and that’s all they are, metaphors.

Where I argue that awareness of green issues is heavily influenced by mediated forms of culture, Christoff thinks that underneath the layer of media hype which floats on the surface of society is a layer of real experience. Hence “daily confrontation with shabby transport systems, grotesquely designed city buildings” and so on “along with the myth of the Bush, fuel concern for unseen, diminishing values such as wilderness, native forests and rare species”.

Now, my model of where green consciousness comes from was meant to be speculative and provocative. But, frankly, I find Christoff’s version of the ‘green effect’ even less plausible. I worked in one of the worst designed buildings in Sydney (the University of Technology’s Broadway bunker block) for years and never once did it make me think about rare species. What did was TV specials, magazine features. I saw those baby seals being dubbed to death on TV and I reached for my cheque book—simple as that.

Where Christoff still thinks of society as having a sort of media dross floating on top and a layer of real experience at the base, I think it is more useful to think of the whole social fabric as now being entirely shot through with media images, forms and stories. Very, very few communities produce their own culture any more in our society, practically nobody. Every cultural resource is mediated. Where does this “myth of the Bush” come from? From school, from books, from TV. Sometimes these things are transmitted via family and community, it’s true. But even then these cultural relations are very often mediated. My parents read me ‘Snugglepot’ bedtime stories too—out of books borrowed from the local library.

It is important to think of the whole range of mediated cultural relations when we think of ‘media’. It’s always difficult to describe to people their own surroundings. This is the point—we are so heavily the product of a mediated culture that we don’t even know it any more. It is our ‘third nature’—beyond even the second nature of these ugly cities we build.

The problem with green politics for me is that it thinks it escapes from this mediated attenuated form of culture when it organises and when it communicates. It doesn’t and it can’t. Christoff thinks that the green movement has influences from “premodern communalism”. Sure, but where do these influences come from? How are they transmitted? Through very postmodern, mediated forms of cultural relation. On the other hand, the green movement does indeed “integrate the latest revolutions in industrial and communications technology” into its organisational form. This is one of its finest achievements. My point is that it would be more useful to see even the anti-modern impulses in the green movement for what they are—highly mediated attempts to resist a mediated culture from within. There is no ‘outside’ to the postmodern, mediated world. There is no place to run.

Christoff concludes: “The organisational forms of the green movement are more important to achieving its gains than Wark believes: media games are only one relatively small part of these larger manoeuvres, and not to be over-emphasised”. If one shifts perspective a bit and grasps the fact that ‘media’ as we usually understand it, Packer, Murdoch and Fairfax, is not the same as ‘mediated culture’—a far more pervasive term and issue—then a lot of what Christoff calls ‘organisation’ is actually mediated organisation.

Now, trade unions, the ALP and other traditional progressive organisations are still trying to come to grips with mediated culture.
These organisations have discovered that traditional organisational forms don't work any more. The branch structure of the ALP, for example, is completely moribund. What is interesting about green organisations is that they are mostly contemporary with the enormous growth of the culture industries and the saturation of old social relations in mediated cultural forms. In short, they are political phenomena which historically coincide with 'postmodern culture' as I understand it.

Incidentally, the appearance of green politics in 'the media' in the narrow sense is hardly unimportant. Business interests have clearly woken up to the fact that TV has a huge influence on people's ethical perceptions of the world, and editorial hostility to green positions is presenting a fact of media life in some quarters. Current affairs information reaches most people in this form of contemporary capitalism and therefore not something that is mediated—discussion on what is to be done. Let's have a—thoroughly deal with it. So perhaps we need else if you like, but we all have to take 'the media' very seriously indeed.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of mediated culture runs a lot deeper than that, right down to the 'basis' of everyday life Christoff seems to think is so pristine. Postmodernism is not an option, it's the cultural form of contemporary capitalism and therefore not something that you can simply make disappear with an argument. Call it something else if you like, but we all have to deal with it. So perhaps we need some more voices in this debate. Let's have a—thoroughly mediated—discussion on what is to be done.

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Angry and Pleased

I'm both angry and pleased that ALR published "Turning off the Tap" (ALR 134). Angry because the article misrepresents the views of most environmentalists, many on the Left and the Australian Democrats. Pleased because serious debate is long overdue on population issues generally and on immigration in particular.

Jock Collins attempts to isolate the arguments for limiting population growth from those for limits to growth generally. When Jock states that "environmental destruction is not something imported or exotic", he ignores the global dimension of the problems that all humanity (and all life as we know it) face. If there is one thing that has become obvious at the end of this century, it is that the earth, and everything on it, including the land, water and air, are finite.

In November 1990 the climate scientists were virtually unanimous when they told the politicians and diplomats at the United Nations Climate Conference that increased global warming was inevitable as a result of human activity. I'm sure I don't have to remind Jock that the prevailing economic systems of capitalism and communism are predicated on exponential economic growth. Today it is a matter of serious debate whether our children or grandchildren will live in a tolerable world unless we start dealing today with the problem of our human numbers as well as our use of not only finite resources, but also the finite sinks (the atmosphere) which accommodate our waste. Jock may not be concerned about this problem, but I share the scientists' view.

I am especially offended by Jock's association of the environment movement with racism. David Suzuki, as a Canadian of Japanese origin, movingly describes how he suffered racism. Jock admits that racism increases during recession times and that many blame immigrants for their unemployment. But instead of attacking the greens, Jock ought to be getting stuck into the economic system that is predicated on greed and growth. "Turning off the Tap" would give great heart to Alan Griffiths (Federal Resources Minister), the Tasmanian Lab-Lib government and some ACTU officials who blame the 'green and black' obstacles to the further desecration of the very fragile soil of this arid country in the name of growth and progress.

Vince Englart
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Crucial Question

I am writing to express disagreement with aspects of Jock Collins' article "Turning off the Tap" (ALR 134)—particularly his criticism of the Ehrlichs' "living in a Zero Population Growth Nirvana". The Ehrlichs, both in The Population Bomb and in The Population Explosion, 20 years later, went to pains to express a view that population, the level of affluence, and the choice of technology had to be taken as an integral whole.

Regardless of the level of migration intake, and the myriad problems associated with the environment, I know of no serious argument that doesn't place the over-population of the planet as the most crucial question confronting us.

Jack Mundey
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Coming up in ALR

- Anna Booth, Peter Baldwin and Peter Robson discuss Labor's economic statement
- Citizenship: just for the boys?
- Video Culture
- Can Yeltsin last?