The Green Old DAYS

The Left lauded modernity; green politics prefers nostalgia. McKenzie Wark looks at the new rules of green politics after modernity.

When we look at a ‘nature’ photograph what do we see? Is it a national park? Is it a wilderness? Is it Nature? It’s funny how there is never any trace of the photographer in these images. The picture at right, titled ‘Impregnable’, was taken by Olegas Truchanas, a famous campaigner against the destruction of Tasmania’s Lake Pedder in the 70s. It is a classic of what is now a readymade genre of ‘beautiful nature’ pictures, all lush green foliage, unspoiled and unsullied.

The trick of pictures like these is that they attempt to hide the fact of their own production from us. They hide the fact that they belong to a vast cultural enterprise, stretching back to romanticism, which wants to present a beautiful and bountiful image of nature. They hide the fact that what we see is constructed, an image, not the real thing at all.

They present nature as an alternative world, a utopia, an elsewhere, leaving out all that lies in between you, the viewer, and the ‘natural’ world. These pictures pretend to evade culture, to bring nature directly to your attention, when they are in fact an artefact of culture.

I have a Wilderness Society calendar up on my kitchen wall, full of these lush green images. I look at them sometimes when I’m bored with the TV or a bit frazzled by work and worries. The rainforest is our utopia now, a naturalist realism in the place of the old socialist realism of shiny roads and bridges and buildings. Yet, ironically, this is not as big a cultural revolution as one might imagine. In fact, contrary to all intention, the rhetoric and imagery of greenness ends up being thoroughly postmodern. Let me explain.

Green imagery offers a promise of a reconciliation with nature. Communion with nature is a redemption proffered to enable us to rise above the alienated, fragmented life of industrial society. And, in an odd sort of way, this com-
munion with nature takes the ideological place of the communism of man of the old Left. The fantasy of communism was an overcoming of nature. Through the development of productive forces, communists would collectively build a world more hospitable than nature. They would 'wrest a realm of freedom from necessity' in Hegel's terms.

In this mythology, our redemption lay in the creation of a second nature—a world built out of and on top of nature, but in our image and amenable to our evolving needs and desires. The visionary dreams of the modern architects and the socialist realist artists were representations of this world. It could be imagined as rational and ordered, or as dreamlike and malleable. Either way, the path to redemption was imagined throughout modern history to lie in the cumulative growth of this second nature.

The problem is that in freeing ourselves from the tyranny of nature we created, not a realm of freedom, but a new world of necessity. Second nature grew into a power over and against us. Now it appears that the technical world of second nature runs us, rather than us running it. The alienation and fragmentation of human existence grows, rather than diminishes. As Foucault says, the modern era is the one in which "man' finally makes 'his' exit". Humanism is dead, killed by the crushing weight of the technical world and the demands it makes upon us. The idea of nature as the realm of freedom from necessity when it creates the alienation and boredom of modern life. This is not just a matter of the extensive net of satellite communications. It could be imagined as rational and ordered, or as dreamlike and malleable. Either way, the path to redemption was imagined throughout modern history to lie in the cumulative growth of this second nature.

Second nature failed to redeem our fallen nature, our alienation from nature, from each other, from the tools and machines that come to overpower us. So enter 'third nature'. By third nature I mean the now vast and extensive realm of media vectors, the information landscape that now almost exactly covers the same space as second nature. This is not just a matter of the extensive net of satellite TV images and international telephone and data communications. It also encompasses the accumulation of vast archives of images and information. If there is anything of substance in the rhetoric of postmodernism it has to do with tracking down the symptoms of precisely this inordinate growth in volume, velocity and density of information flows and reservoirs.

This is the irony about the green movement: it is only made possible by third nature, the most artificial thing human society ever created. The photograph of an 'impenetrable' cliff, the TV documentary about penguins, the coffee table book on Aboriginal art, the talk show about rainforests on Radio National—all of this is third nature. The images and rhetorics of nature and community are only possible via third nature.

The nostalgia for an unmediated, direct communion with nature is a fantasy. It is a useful fantasy to the extent that it makes a lot of people realise that second nature is a vast and uncontrollable juggernaut that might just self-destruct. The rhetoric of nature reminds us that oppression, alienation and boredom are not the only ills plaguing second nature. The realisation that second nature has strip-mined nature itself to create this dangerous, ugly world is an even more final phase of disenchantment.

It is a fantasy to suppose that communion with nature is possible at all, and many people realise this, either consciously or unconsciously. In creating language, culture, tools, we turned our backs on nature a long time ago. It is equally fantastical to imagine that there can be a going back to community, to forms of society less alienated and of smaller scale, in harmony with nature. Nature is dead. The skies are a different colour now. The air is a different temperature. The shape of the land and the chemicals in the soil are not what they used to be. We burned all our bridges. This is the result of modernity, for good or ill.

There is nowhere to go but deeper into third nature, into the creation of an information landscape. Marshall McLuhan popularised the idea that community could be recreated on a global scale via the media: the 'global village'. This idea is popular again now, 'recycled' under the marketing labels of virtual reality, cyberspace and hypermedia. Yet after the Gulf War it should be clear to everybody that redemption won't come from third nature. Here Baudrillard and Bahro, the prophets of melancholy postmodernism and green fundamentalism respectively, come to stand for very complementary projects of disenchantment. Where Bahro debunked the marxist faith in second nature, Baudrillard poured ironic scorn on the McLuhanite myth of third nature.

So we are left with a tragic story; humankind wrests a dimension of freedom from necessity when it creates the second nature of technology, the city, modern life. Yet this turns out to be simply a new realm of alienation and a graveyard for humanist dreams. The desires and dreams deferred from this struggle are invested anew in the realm of third nature, the postmodern world of the information landscape.

So where does that leave us? In an era of great political opportunity. All the old myths have taken a tremendous beating. Old forms of organisation are falling apart. Power is intrinsically bound to flows of information as much as it is to the control of territory. In this sense the struggles in eastern Europe for territorial control are a backward-looking movement. The really significant political struggles today are about who controls the flows, not the territories—flows of people, capital, resources, technology, but above all, information.

The struggle for the Left is to maintain and develop diversity in the form and content of information politics, and to
forms of political communication. The form of politics There are useful lessons to be learned from these innovative
Econet which now circle the globe.

in green politics, from the media stunts of Greenpeace to
its goals are global and its lifeblood is communication.
So green politics takes a unique form. It is composed of very
'local' organisations, it has bases in the 'community', but
growth out of second nature and its internal contradictions.
The green movement did too, but developed later and went
further. It points to the contradiction between second na­
ture and its grounding in nature itself.

The green movement has added some new ideas to this
innovative political forms in the postmodern era have been
created by the green movement. The greens lack a basis in
second nature. They did not develop historically at the time
that the distinctive forms of political organisation of the
modern period grew and then ossified. The progressive
political parties, the trade unions, the social movements,
grew out of second nature and its internal contradictions.
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ture and its grounding in nature itself.

There are useful lessons to be learned from these innovative
forms of political communication. The form of politics
pioneered by the greens will, in one form or another, be­
come important for the rest of us too. The traditional forms
of organisation don't work any more. Throughout the
western world, traditional political parties are in decline.
This is, at least in part, because the form of organisation
they developed was dependent on the control of territory.
A political party is a form of territorial organisation. It holds
together diverse interests through a branch structure cover­
ing the territory, and at co-ordinates this task through a
centralised machine charged with the task of capturing
centralised power. Communication in such organisations

is tied to the territorial structure of the party (or union)

machine.

The communications revolution has made this form of
organisation obsolete. There is no need any longer to or­
ganise politics on a territorial basis. People don't actually
have to meet to reconcile their interests, choose their repre­
sentatives and so forth. The decline of the branch structures
of the political parties and the failure of new parties ever to
really get off the ground demonstrate this. With the
broadening of the communication channels open to a wide
section of the population, one can bypass the tedious old
branch politics and still maintain an open and flexible
politics. Public radio, desktop publishing, computer bul­
letin boards—these are just some of the accessible means
for developing networks of interest, based on developing
flows of counter-information rather than on developing
places of counter-organisation.

The idea that the political Left has a vested interest in better
communications and ought to be a communications in­
ovator is not exactly novel. Up until recently it was the
norm. The correspondence societies of the early 19th cen­
tury were an innovative use of the emerging postal system.
The German Social Democrats developed news agencies
and a diverse and popular press. The popular front leftists
between the wars took on radio, cinema and theatre. The
60s radicals discovered the power of staging media spec­
tacles to influence popular opinion.

All of these are struggles to extend the diversity of com­
munications and to make third nature responsive to
popular interests and demands. Now is the time to step up
this process, not to shrink from it. Building a political force
from the ground up is no longer a matter of recruiting
bodies into branches. Politics doesn't work like that any
more. It is about developing diverse communicational net­
works of a more fluid but more extensive kind.

The green movement has added some new ideas to this
process, but the whole history of the Left represents an
incredible history of such innovations. It matters little
whether the ideology and the rhetoric of these innovations
stresses a utopia based on a positive image of 'nature',
'mankind' or whatever. So let's spend less time worrying
what ideological mix or alliance will save us, and spend
more time developing the channels through which the
many voices of need and desire and hope can flow.

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quarie University.