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 to keep it going. All this was apparent before green politics and the cult of nature gained widespread ideological currency. The shift to faith in nature is in fact a byproduct of the failure of humanism. Communism's myth of a second nature is indeed dead. What has taken its place is nostalgia. Yet this nostalgia is not as ancient as it likes to pretend. Both the myth of beautiful nature and the myth of the ancient, tribal society in harmony with itself and nature are recent inventions. Both are representations of a longing which began at the same time as industrial society: the dream of romanticism. Romanticism has found its true vocation in the second nature—a world built out of and on top of nature, and against us. Now it appears that the technical world of 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 stripped 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
articulate different demands and desires in appropriate forms to achieve appropriate ends. This is a flexible, pragmatic politics involving a network of interests and organisations. There is no room any more for the endless moralising of the 70s. There is no master-rhetoric. There is no yardstick of ideological soundness. There are only opportunities and goals. This is the postmodern condition.

It is perhaps appropriate, then, that some of the most 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. The green movement did too, but developed later and went further. It points to the contradiction between second nature and its grounding in nature itself.

So green politics takes a unique form. It is composed of very ‘local’ organisations, it has bases in the ‘community’, but its goals are global and its lifeblood is communication. Hence the tremendous innovation in the use of the media in green politics, from the media stunts of Greenpeace to the diverse computer networks such as Peacenet and Econet which now circle the globe.

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, become 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 covering the territory, and ot 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 organise politics on a territorial basis. People don’t actually have to meet to reconcile their interests, choose their representatives 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 bulletin 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 innovator is not exactly novel. Up until recently it was the norm. The correspondence societies of the early 19th century 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 spectacles to influence popular opinion.

All of these are struggles to extend the diversity of communications 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 networks 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.

McKENZIE WARK teaches in communications at Macquarie University.