

HOUSE ORGAN

Thinking Like an Ecosocialist

This issue of *Capitalism Nature Socialism* offers four articles on philosophical themes: John Clark explores the negative dialectic of the Second century CE Buddhist sage of the “middle way,” Nagarjuna, to arrive at a notion of the “ecology of emptiness.” Katherine Farrell examines the critical theory of Herbert Marcuse in search of a philosophical foundation for a “postnormal” science. Charles Verharen undertakes a novel exploration of “survival ethics” through an appreciation of socialist Cuba’s resilience. And Adrian Wilding develops a critical philosophy of nature through a re-reading of the Frankfurt School, with special attention to Marcuse.

The work is diverse, of high quality—and it raises the question of what role speculative thinking is to play in the development of ecosocialism. Though the word, ecosocialism, does not appear in any of the four articles, each may be read as preparing its ground. Now, if to bring ecosocialism into being requires the overcoming of capital, “the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society,” to use a phrase of Marx, and as this must be done in the mind as well as in the streets and the workplaces, so does ecosocialism require a consistent philosophical perspective. Further, as ecosocialism negates the existing, capitalist state of affairs, and as dialectic is the discourse and method of negation, the philosophical approach to ecosocialism is dialectical. Dialectic is the method of overcoming, eternally negating—even, at its most radical, negating itself. This is a core feature of Clark’s argument: the negative dialectic in the hands of a master like Nagarjuna dissolves all fixed and frozen categories, and hence is essential for thought that overturns the given. The theme recurs throughout the history of ideas, at times, unexpectedly. Thus St. Paul, roughly Nagarjuna’s contemporary, had a similar insight, which he put in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,/and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” For “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.” (RSV, 1.19, 27-28).

The dialectical tradition was betrayed by Paul under the exigencies of church-building and has been reliably betrayed since by ecclesiastical powers. Nonetheless it was transmitted through religious backchannels. It surfaced in the subversive early Renaissance science of figures like Paracelsus, and passed through the minds of mystics like Jacob Boehme on its way to the synthesis of Hegel, who made the grave mistake of fancying that he had perfected the notion. Marx saw through this and proclaimed the eternally radical implications of dialectic, nowhere more clearly than in the Postface to the second edition of *Capital*. Hegel’s dialectic, once demystified,

includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.

The theme was again sounded by Herbert Marcuse in his *Reason and Revolution*, and implicitly shapes the contributions of Farrell and Wilding as they work to restore the influence of that great thinker. From another angle we hear its echo in Verharen, who recognizes that Cuba, imperfectly socialist as it may be, nonetheless infuses ethics with a life-affirmative character essential for surviving the ecological crisis.

Or, to see it from another angle, surviving our own destructivity, of which the ecological crisis is the manifestation and capital the efficient cause. Paleolithic extinctions of great mammals and birds demonstrate that the proclivity to harm nature is deeply embedded in human existence, preceding industrial society by millennia; the harming of nature must be reckoned as the obverse side of our species-specific productive power. Innumerable societies have perished according to various follies associated with production gone awry.

Capitalism—and the modernity of which it is the productive force—is not simply the extension of earlier modes of destructivity. It introduces a qualitative shift into a new order capable of bringing down civilization itself through the compulsion to endlessly expand. The specific capitalist mentality is shaped by this: calculating, subjectively registered, and exfoliating into systems of ideas. The megamachine driving civilization must be geared and lubricated in all its parts if it is to function properly. Ideas that do not actively contest capital serve to enhance the effectiveness of its machine.

The root of capital's mentality lies in its law of value and the principle of exchangeability necessary for endless accumulation. Marx's dictum that capital was animated by the principle, "Accumulate, Accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!," is no mere rhetorical flourish. It conveys, rather, the monstrous force driving the megamachine, a force once drawn from nature, and experienced spiritually, and now turned against nature. It is an exact measure of what the ecosocialist impulse must contend with.

If everything can be given a monetary value, then anything can be exchanged for anything else. This is another way of saying that under capitalism nothing is sacred—including all forms of rationality that evolved before society came under the spell of capital and its notion of progress. These must be sequestered and kept from renewing their power. What is pre-capitalist is not necessarily abandoned, though it is often disparaged and even ridiculed, and in many cases, appears in the perversions of new age technologies.

Such thoughts occurred to me recently while perusing *Green Hermeticism*, a book given for review by my friend and *Capitalism Nature Socialism* contributor, Peter Lamborn Wilson. The subtitle of *Green Hermeticism*, "Alchemy and Ecology," combines one of our most *au courant* buzzwords with a term pretty well tossed into the dustbin of history, and the object of scorn by the educated classes. Like astrology, alchemy is widely regarded as a remnant of an age in which blind superstition was the rule and backward religion the dominant power. Pity the poor alchemists! Ignorant of the marvels of atomic theory—among which we must include all the wonderful products of our chemical industries—the alchemists wasted their lives in casting spells over metals in the search for gold, the Holy Grail, and the True Cross.

But *Green Hermeticism* is no simpleminded affirmation of what is ordinarily construed as alchemy. Wilson and Christopher Bamford, his principal collaborator, demonstrate, rather, that alchemy was the practical and material aspect of Hermeticism, a much vaster

enterprise and worldview. Though restricted by a limited comprehension of the structure of the physical universe, the Hermeticist/alchemists nonetheless stayed faithful to something that has been lost in the suicidal race toward maximum production—a preservation of the whole, which is to say, an ecological integrity that entitles the two words in *Green Hermeticism's* subtitle to be linked.

The wisdom of *Green Hermeticism* comes into view against the backdrop of the catastrophes wrought by capitalist industrialization. Wilson in particular connects alchemy and hermeticism with the romantic protest whose defeat by modernity opens the way to eco-catastrophe. Significantly, Wilson considers the fate of Marxism in this light as well. As he puts it:

We need to bury the myth that Magic and Romanticism are somehow inherently reactionary—a myth deliberately sponsored both by Stalinists and “democratic” cultural historians . . . as a form of triumphalist absolutism.

Now that Marxism has crumbled, one victor holds the field: [sic] Enlightenment Rationalism’s greatest victory: the free market as inexorable law of nature. The only possible dialectical negation of this thesis, I think, must come from the long-abandoned and even repressed Hermetic Left, and from Romantic Science, and from spirituality. *Green Hermeticism*.

. . . The poetic and artistic realm is also not peripheral here but quite central. Only Hermeticism of all traditions recognizes art as praxis rather than as mere auxiliary “support for contemplation.” Hermeticism defines itself as art—Our Art.

Green Hermeticism can be the basis for our approach to the coming revelation, the coherent spiritual movement that constitutes the only imaginable alternative to unending degradation of Earth and humanity. [p. 54]

Thus these antiquated gestures of a lost science are also shards of defeated modes of production, the reconstruction of which can shed light upon the madness of our time.

The figure of Hermes is primordial, standing for that which is in-between and in motion, as well as everything that flows. Hermeticism belongs to a stratum that might be called pre-moral: thus Hermes is also known as the borrower, and especially, the thief. The Greek God, and his Roman *confrere* Mercury, are the best-known names by which the principle is embodied, but Wilson and Bamford properly expand the term with a dazzling tour through world culture and literature, scarcely missing a note. They also identify many of the infinitely complex relations between Hermeticism and the religions of history, in particular, the monotheistic Abrahamic triad—Judaism/Christianity/Islam—who have arrogated the stage to themselves and largely forced from it the Hermetic/dialectical modalities nourished by ecosystemic contact with the earth. I found particularly valuable here Wilson’s emphasis on the Hermetic principle of *syncretism*—inspired borrowing, mingling, and holding together—which can serve as a necessary methodological ancilla to the making of dialectic. For Hermes is also the translator, as “Hermeneutics” is the study of meanings. Even psychoanalysis can be brought into the mix, Freud’s voyage into the underworld being suitable to represent the Hermetic quest for meaning and the subversion of time, even if the actual application has long since sunk into a bourgeois stupor.

I have one critical observation to offer: that Wilson and Bamford should better ground their investigation in terms of prehistory. The great body of *Green Hermeticism* concerns ancient and modern state formations. Missing is a consistent treatment of the state-free primordium and its older and deeper archetype known as the Trickster, Hermes' ancestor. Evidence of the Trickster goes back as far as cave paintings from 18,000 years ago. S/he was an omnipresent figure in original society, before there were heroes and kings. Like Hermes to come, Trickster evokes the original and never-ending fluidity of human being, arising from an epoch when class and the notion of private property based on class was non-existent. The shaman is Trickster's descendent, as are the figures on Hermeticism's tapestry, all the way to Paracelsus, Blake, and those cultural/political radicals who are charged with rescuing civilization from the grasp of false reason (Blake's Urizen), and bringing ecosocialism into the world.

—Joel Kovel