

# ANNUAL BOOK SECTION



## NEW GODS OR OLD IDOLS?

BY GLEN E. THURLOW



**T**he left finds itself in disarray today in world politics. The great hope placed in socialist and communist economics seems dashed as country after country, including the Soviet Union itself, turns toward freer markets to rescue itself from economic ruin. The governments that were to bring about the perfect social state have been revealed to be stultifying bureaucracies at their best and brutal tyrannies at their worst. If movements live and die by their results, one would think that the radical left would be in its death throes.

But when one looks at the theorists of the environmental movement, the phoenix appears to be rising from denuded forests. Diverse as these four books are, all have a common enemy. That enemy is not simply mistreatment of the environment, but the free economy and political institutions of the United States. Even more fundamentally, one finds in these books an attack on Western civilization, that tradition which finds its roots in Greek philosophy and biblical religion—in reason and in revelation.

Hitherto the attack on the United States and the West has been most powerfully expressed politically in Marxism. According to Marxism, reason is impotent before the forces of history and can only be understood as a rationalization of more fundamental materialistic realities. And revelation is but a tool in the hands of the ruling powers, used

to support their oppression. Can this radical impulse to destroy the foundations of the West find a new home in the environmental movement?

It is clear that the environmental movement has many of the advantages of the “popular fronts” long used by radical political movements. Because concern for the environment is widespread, all kinds of people not at all attracted to radical

causes can be brought to its support. The movement can even claim to be nonpolitical, or to have transcended old categories as in the slogan of the German Greens: “We are neither left nor right; we are in front.” It has the additional advantages of being concerned with humanity as a whole rather than with the selfishness of states, and, with notable exceptions, of being a peaceful movement not particularly frightening to the average citizen.

In order to make environmentalism the home of radical politics, the most fundamental intellectual task required is to show that environmental problems are the result of the free market and the political institutions of the United States. To be truly radical, the environmental critique must tie these problems to the very roots of Western civilization. The second and third required tasks are to show that there is a better alternative and to point the way to move from our present circumstances to this better state.

Radical environmentalists must also jus-

*Making Peace with the Planet*, by Barry Commoner, New York: Pantheon Books, 292 pages, \$19.98

*Remaking Society*, by Murray Bookchin, Montreal: Black Rose Books, 222 pages, \$10.00 paper

*Gaia: The Growth of an Idea*, by Lawrence E. Joseph, New York: St. Martin's Press, 276 pages, \$19.95

*Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization*, by Christopher Manes, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 291 pages, \$18.95

tify the bad environmental records of socialist countries in order to make plausible the contention that free markets are the culprit. Each of these four books approaches these tasks in a different way. The four books together represent a good cross section of the range of views in today's left environmentalism.

**B**arry Commoner has for two decades been a leader in left environmentalism and has published numerous books and articles on the topic. His latest book, *Making Peace with the Planet*, is a repetition and summary of positions he has long held. A professed socialist, Commoner argues that environmental degradation can be traced to the profit motive within capitalism, which leads corporations to choose those productive technologies that bring the biggest short-term profit.

Environmental regulation by the government, Commoner argues, has not solved this fundamental problem because it does not control the source of environmental damage but only looks to repairing the damage once it occurs—a much harder and more expensive task. He devotes a large part of this book to showing that the environmental regulations of the past 20 years, and the huge costs associated with them, have achieved little improvement in the environment. It is only by governmental control of what is produced that real environmental improvement can be made. Government must prevent, not control, pollution, and this requires “social intervention in the hitherto private governance of production technology.”

Freed of the need to earn short-term profits, government can choose technologies that will be compatible with the environment. Commoner thus offers a simple solution for environmental problems: We need simply to change the goal of those governing technology in order to find and apply the technologies that will be nonpolluting.

Commoner's solution to environmental problems shows a naive faith both in government and in technology. Commoner assumes that governmental control of production decisions will result in decisions that take account of the distant social costs of production. But why should that be? That has not been the case in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, whose pollution record we now know to be horrendous. Commoner's explanation is that the socialist countries borrowed their technologies from the West, where they were created by the profit motive. The socialist countries need to create their own. Existing socialist economies, in other words, are really capitalist economies as far as their productive apparatus is concerned. One must give Commoner credit for the inventiveness with which he avoids letting the facts interfere with his love of socialism.

Commoner also believes that through proper technology we can have our cake and eat it too. We do not have to sacrifice any desire other than the desire to own and manage our own property in order to have a clean environment. Science and technology in the proper hands, with their fruits properly distributed, can show us not only how to clean up the environment but how to rid the earth of poverty and war as well. Commoner asks: Can we “produce bountiful harvests, productive machinery, rapid transportation, and decent human dwellings sufficient to support the world population without despoiling the environment?” His answer is an emphatic yes. No hard choices will be necessary in the socialist state.

**T**his optimism is questioned by Murray Bookchin, who pushes Commoner's views to a deeper level in *Remaking Society*. Bookchin is emeritus director of the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont and considers himself a “social ecologist” (as does Commoner). A social

ecologist is one who believes that the root causes of environmental problems are to be found in the structures and institutions of existing society.

Like Commoner, Bookchin believes that environmental degradation is “inherent to capitalism,

the product of its very law of life, as a system of limitless expansion and capital accumulation.” Bookchin is clearer than Commoner in his outspoken opposition to the institutions of representative democracy as well.

To his credit, Bookchin sees that Marxism cannot easily form the theoretical ground for environmentalism. Marx had little love of nature. Marx viewed nature as “‘stingy,’ ‘blind,’ or a cruel ‘realm of necessity,’ ” and considered capitalism a great historical advance in “its ruthless capacity to destroy all restraints and limits on the ravaging of the natural world.” In addition, in extolling the proletariat, Marx did not see that the proletariat would become “domesticated” by capitalists and hence lack environmental consciousness, among other things. A proletarian revolution would not be an environmental revolution.

Yet there remains a large element of Marxism in Bookchin's thought. Bookchin argues that the root of environmental degradation is the idea of human domination, whether over nature or over fellow humans. This idea is not the result of a general human preference for our own species, but is the product of certain kinds of human societies, particularly the modern capitalist state. Bookchin constructs a history of mankind to show that the original harmonious relationship between man and nature gave way to human dominance as a result of human social choices.

This view allows Bookchin to lump all kinds of domi-

**To make environmentalism the home of radical politics, intellectuals in the movement must link environmental problems with the free market—and with Western civilization itself.**

*EARTH FIRST!*  
*obviously*  
*forgot that*  
*Lincoln was*  
*affectionately*  
*called*  
*"the old*  
*rail-splitter."*



nance together—that of capitalists over society, of men over women, of the West over the Third World, of God over men, of corporations over the environment. And he hopes that this theoretical union can be turned into a practical union of all the dominated for the sake of revolution against existing society.

Although he has little faith in the proletariat and does not share Marx's contempt for nature, Bookchin does share the heart of Marxism—its yearning for a society free of all contradictions, in which people shall freely live in harmony with each other and with nature. The Marxist vision of a classless, noncoercive community in which the state shall have withered away is also that of Bookchin, but he adds to it an overlay whose roots can be traced to Rousseau.

Bookchin's history, like Rousseau's in the *Second Discourse*, begins with primitive men in harmony with nature. The two histories show how that primitive harmony becomes lost with the development of society. Unlike some of the "deep ecologists," Bookchin does not yearn for a return to the primitive. He rather believes that a good society would be a federation of "libertarian municipalities." Societies should be organized into cities that would be substantially smaller units than the modern state. These cities would be "libertarian" because there would be no coercive government (the state would wither away). Such cities would be governed by the "general will." Citizens would rule through "face-to-face assemblies," but they would have to act as citizens, not as individual men and women. "As citizens, they would function in such assemblies at their highest level—their human level—rather than as socially ghettoized beings. They would express their general human interests, not their particular status interest."

Where are we to get these citizens who will vote the general will, not their private interests and desires? Like

Marx, Bookchin relies upon the progress of history to get us to this state, a progress that will have to make its decisive advance through a spontaneous uprising. There is absolutely nothing in Bookchin's argument, other than this faith in history's ability to transform (and thus dominate?) human nature, to guarantee that his environmental utopia will have an outcome any different from that of Marx's proletarian utopia: the dominance of tyrants and bureaucrats.

Although he may be closer to the deep ecologists than he sometimes seems to realize, Bookchin's argument is polemically directed against their movement. Deep ecologists argue that the environmental crisis can be traced to civilization itself, which is understood to rest on human claims to superiority over, and separation from, the rest of nature. Both *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea* and *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* may be placed within the deep ecology movement. The former is chiefly interesting for its religious implications, while the latter is an attack on the claims of human reason.

Lawrence Joseph is a science reporter whose work has appeared in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. *Gaia* is a report on the scientific theory, developed by the British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock and the American microbiologist Lynn Margulis, that the earth is a living organism in which living things interact with nonliving to maintain the conditions for life. Joseph's reportage is a chatty blend of analysis of the scientific evidence for the theory, descriptions of behind-the-scenes political maneuvering in science, invocations of ancient goddesses, and wide-ranging musings about the philosophical, religious, and practical implications of the theory. It is at times an entertaining and at times

an exasperating book.

Amidst this collage, the theme that Joseph returns to again and again is the resurrection of the ancient goddess, Gaia, by modern science. The book begins, "Daughter of Chaos and mother and lover of the sky (Uranus), the Mountain (Ourea), and the sea (Pontus), Gaia, Greek goddess of the Earth, has been reborn through modern science." Joseph seems to be fascinated by this possibility, while not quite certain whether to take it seriously. He will lead his reader in one direction, only to reverse his course on the next page.

The resurrection of pagan gods and goddess in the environmental movement is directed against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, which allegedly teach that a dominating male God has given the earth to mankind to rule in order that men might subdue it to their own lust. The religion of Mother Earth, on the other hand, makes room for the feminine, teaches that mankind is but one species among many with no higher or lower status than any other, and insists that humans must live in symbiosis with the rest of nature. At the same time, it reaches across existing cultures, for nature is what is common among all peoples, of whatever religion. Many environmentalist Christians want to reinterpret Christianity to accommodate the resurrected goddess. Lovelock himself suggests, "What if Mary is another name for Gaia? Then her capacity for virgin birth is no miracle or parthenogenetic aberration, it is the role of Gaia since life began."

The acolytes of Gaia at times suggest the picture of nature as nurturing, of a democratic embrace between mankind and the rest of creation, mirroring the proper relationship between man and man. Yet there is sometimes also present in this view a hatred of mankind. Might mankind be a disease in the living organism of the earth, polluting and destroying her being? Although he generally resists the temptation, Joseph sometimes backs into this view: "But the comparison with cancer's wildly disruptive proliferation, almost a parody of healthy reproduction, does seem a bit too close to dismiss easily."

While Joseph is at once excited by, and full of reservations about, the replacement of Western religion by the Earth Mother, Christopher Manes in *Green Rage* has no reservations about his passions. *Green Rage* is a defense of Earth First!, a group willing to use not only civil disobedience but sabotage (deemed "ecotage") to defend the ecology. Manes is a young environmentalist, formerly an associate editor of the journal *Earth First!*

The title of the book is meant to indicate that reason should be abandoned for rage, for it is "cool, rational minds who have helped bring the ecological crisis roaring down upon us." Manes sums up the tenets of radical environmentalism as "the persuasion that humankind is not the center of value on this planet, the conviction that the other species of

Earth have just as much right to exist as humans do, the belief that wilderness and not civilization is the real world." But he insists that radical environmentalism is a sensibility, not a doctrine, based on a "frightening realization: that our culture is lethal to the ecology that it depends on."

**P**art of *Green Rage* is devoted to an interesting account of the rise of radical environmentalism. Manes identifies anthropocentrism, the view that the world should be ordered to human ends, "as the root of our troubled relationship with nature." In its place, deep ecology sees humans as but one of many facets of nature, so that it considers itself "biocentric" or "ecocentric." The animal-rights movement goes in the right direction but not far enough, for plants and nonliving matter are also part of the whole, with rights equal to those of humans.

But Manes is smart enough to see the contradictions being woven. He sees that the idea of rock rights does not go far enough to avoid anthropocentrism, for the very notion of rights is human. He discovers that there are no values in nature and even no meaning.

Consequently, Manes has a difficult time treating the ethical issues that arise from civil disobedience or

sabotage. He finally throws up his hands, casts off the restraints morality might place on environmentalists, and says that the issue is "what effect ecotage is actually having on the environmental movement and the culture in general." The environmentalist becomes the Machiavellian. Yet this hardly seems an explanation for Manes's moral outrage, which cannot be understood as simply self-defense. Animals defend, but they do not become morally outraged.

Since it is precisely the ability to distinguish good from bad, and meaning from chaos, that distinguishes men from other animals, mankind must be reduced to its animal character if values and meaning are to disappear. The nearest Manes can get to this is tribal life, whose virtue is its wildness and harmony with nature. But one might wonder whether even to prize that harmony is not anthropocentric. To be true to himself, Manes should not rage, but remain silent.

The incoherence of much current leftist environmental thought can be seen in these books, but it is also possible to see the power of the range of emotions, sentiments, and thought that can be tapped by the left through the environmental movement. Those who would defend the free institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy should not underestimate the challenge presented.

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**The acolytes of Gaia suggest a nurturing embrace between mankind and the rest of creation. Yet this view also at times presents a hatred of mankind.**

# CONSTITUTIONAL VISIONS

BY ROGER PILON



In law as in life, where you start often has a lot to do with where you end. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, for example, they started earlier in the century with the group and have struggled ever since to find any room for the individual, which they now seem to be doing only by starting all over again. In America we were more fortunate in having begun our experiment with the individual. Not that the individual has not lost much ground over the years, but our starting point has proved a powerful anchor in that drift.

*After the Rights Revolution* begins with FDR's "second Bill of Rights." Our original rights "proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness," FDR wrote to Congress in January 1944. We have accepted, therefore, "a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all," including the right to a useful and remunerative job, the right to earn enough, the right of farmers to a decent living and of businessmen to be free from unfair competition, the right to a decent home, the right to adequate medical care, the right to a good education, and on and on.

Those are, of course, the "rights" of the modern regulatory state, the state that Cass Sunstein wants to defend "against influential attacks, recently found, for example, in the Reagan and Thatcher administrations and often based on free-market economics and pre-New Deal principles of private right." This is no ordinary defense, however. Steeped in the literature of public choice and law and economics, Sunstein is keenly aware of the shortcomings of the modern state. His principal aim, therefore, is "to suggest reforms and principles that would promote the purposes of statutory programs and of constitutional government, while avoiding these problems."

What emerges, however, is an often sophisticated, often frustrating apology for the modern state, an apology that too often wants to have it both ways. Yes, minimum-wage laws increase unemployment. Still, "labor markets create a prisoner's dilemma that is soluble only through government action." Yes, deliberate preference—shaping of desires and beliefs through governmental control—smacks of totalitarianism. Still, that point should not be taken to deprive citizens of the power to counteract, through laws providing information and opportunities, "preferences and beliefs that have adapted to an unjust or otherwise objectionable status

quo." (There's your rationale for PBS: It's for "people who are indifferent to high-quality broadcasting because they have experienced only banal situation comedies.")

In general, Sunstein calls for "a kind of American-style *perestroika*—a restructuring of institutional arrangements and substantive controls that is entirely unembarrassed by the use of government to reflect democratic aspirations, to promote individual autonomy and economic welfare, and to foster distributional equity, but that also insists on strategies that embody the flexibility, adaptability, productive potential, and decentralization characteristic of private markets."

Yet how could Sunstein not be ambivalent—I choose to be charitable—when he takes the central purpose of constitutional government to be the "promotion" of both autonomy and welfare? The effort to actively promote those ends through "deliberate democracy"—"to respect private property and freedom of contract, but also to permit a large range of governmental activity in the interest of economic productivity and protection of the disadvantaged"—necessarily leads to inconsistency, which can be "transcended" only by treating "the satisfaction of private preferences, whatever their content, [as] an utterly implausible conception of liberty or autonomy. The notion of autonomy should be taken to refer instead to decisions reached with a full and vivid awareness of available opportunities, with all relevant information, or, most generally, without illegitimate constraints on the process of preference formation." Hegel could not have put it better.

There is about this book, then, a large measure of the vision that has been upon us since the Progressive Era: Disdainful, in the end, of the private realm, with all its contingent variety, the vision and its adherents would force us, through the democratic device, to be "free." Although their preferred vehicles are the legislative and executive branches, "it is inevitable that some role will remain for the courts," Sunstein avers. And here, "the task of interpretation calls for sympathetic engagement with the modern regulatory state, not for the use of [first] principles conspicuously rejected by the rise of regulation."

Thus "in the aftermath of the New Deal, courts have been reluctant to use the Con-

*After the Rights Revolution: Reconciling the Regulatory State*, by Cass R.

Sunstein, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 284 pages, \$25.00

*The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law*, by Robert H. Bork, New York: Free Press, 432 pages, \$22.50