

Radical Politics

Paul Shepard

I have long suspected that the civil rights movement of the sixties, the upsurge of feminism in the seventies, and the attention to Third World deprivation in the eighties all had their roots in education, that the general outrage grew out of the classes and organizations spawned by the restless temper of the modern university. I further imagine that such has been the case since universities began 700 years ago. One might conclude that scholarship has played a substantial role in the twists and turns of ideological foment. The limitations of this intellectual and political turbulence are all the more striking for a certain kind of conformity.

This is not to say that dialogues, which flame through college campuses and boil out into the public, are not crucial. They are terribly urgent. Their status is marked by their longevity, for the issues of human persecution and survival are approaching their 6,000th birthday, the fallout of war, slavery, aggression, colonialism, and other power struggles in some ways so new and in others so old.

We humans are said to be next in rank to the angels, but our intra-species conflicts have a kind of narrow-minded cruelty about them. In six millennia of radicalism we still see the world as a pie—each year a bit smaller in relation to the numbers of those fighting to slice it. For the most part, academia is oblivious to the larger issue, having itself been spawned by hubris, magnified by the Renaissance that endowed us with the dogma of an earth without organic and spiritual integrity.

As a university teacher, I have been surrounded for years by the rhetoric of this narrow notion of historical progress in every discipline—the solutions to sexual injustice as empowerment, navel scrutiny therapy for social strife, the endless horse-opera of political intrigue, economic myopia, aesthetic secularism, scientific reductionism, and other-world theologies—all seeking The Way on issues, as infinitely important as the life of a child, by looking into mirrors.

The virulence first arose with the defeat of indigenous peoples in subsistence economies. It next absorbed peasant resentment and then all the neuroses of over-dense primates captive in their own cities. The real issues of wildness, limitation, and multi-species otherness have never suited a radical approach. For 6,000 years (150,000 generations) and 700 years of university learning (17,500 generations of students) humans have been caught in a web of “species-ism” which denies the essential diversity of all life on earth. In so doing, they have defaulted their own education, losing the first social principle, which asks compliance with the truly radical Other: the constraints and obligations of the biological reality of ecosystem and planetary communities composed of Beings.

I do not object to the endless furor in the intellectual arenas—from elegant think tanks to barefoot campuses. But the revolutions and coups abroad, the screeds and broadsides in my mail, the hype of the media, the protests in the streets are not nearly liberal and radical enough to suit me. They began with the victims of Sargon, Solomon, and Caesar and continue with the victims of atomic energy commissions, multi-national corporations, and their CEOs, all with pie spatulas in hand.

Conservatism is not nearly conservative enough for me either. It is not even conservative at all, being a ‘tradition’ that resists the yielding of domination and power, and fears the Others rather than striving to conserve life on Earth.

In their hearts neither radicals nor conservatives really hate non-human life. It has simply been marginalized by them by apathy, indifference, and attitudes toward the Others as mere stuff by the Right; simulations in pets, kindness, and biologically meaningless crusades by the Left.

Intellectually, we are engaged in planet-wide devastation of ecosystems. Nature and its perception are seen as one more offering in the marketplace of ideas and policies. The impact of the human population, the existence of other species, the menacing of soil, water, and forests, the use of watersheds, the energy and nutrient systems, the air itself, all become ideological neutral resources. Each of these becomes an issue in which coalitions of social groups rise and fall, working out their compromises on the shared assumption that the world has no intrinsic structure, few givens, but rather an order projected upon it by humans that creates coherence. One chooses ecological relationships the way one chooses a political party or brands at a grocery.

The ideological myth presupposes a definition of being, which is at odds with modern ecological and ethnological understanding, hence those sciences are seen as subversive and often in tandem with feminist concerns, sharing an organismic and intuitive core. The myth has an enormous momentum. Environmentalism itself is highly power- and patriarchy based. Social and natural sciences with their value-free fact-finding all seem to confirm that “humans make themselves” no matter how the world is made.

Literally ideology is the “study of ideas.” But in practice it means the advocacy of a position consciously taken, framing one’s beliefs around an issue. As an expression of how-things-come-to-be, it is a myth in the anthropological sense. The old gods and goddesses are replaced by historical figures who formulate political choices.

It is hard on balance to be comforted by this picture. Perhaps hope lies in going back over our human history to our beginnings to refashion new approaches to living on Earth that conform to how the world was made. Clues to choices before us are spelled out in precious genetic codes that contain the wisdom of millions of years of evolution, in healthy and harmonious

ecosystems, and in traditions of place-based cultures that have survived the test of time. The past is not a place of obsolescence but a tracery to the present where the constraints of choices before us become evident and we choose a path that is spiritually and ecologically based.