

The One and Only Paleo-Conservative

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What were Paul Shepard's politics? Those who knew him could enlighten us on his political opinions, or the views of his early activist years.¹ My discussion is restricted to his major writings. I conclude that Shepard must be considered a conservative. Two reactions are likely: "How could you insult Shepard that way?" And, "What else could he be?" Doubtless little is to be gained from simplistic labels. But something can be learned about Shepard, and environmental politics, in thinking through this question.

In discussing Shepard's early book *The Subversive Science* (1969), Garrett Hardin specifically broached the question of how environmentalism is, and is not, akin to conservatism. Obviously environmentalism wants to conserve *something*.² It is not conservative of ancient beliefs, being based in modern science. It has no interest in conserving social privileges, since it must seek to change social institutions that degrade the natural environment. It is future oriented in anticipating eventual results of current practice. But sometimes conserving environmental resources means conserving older economic and social practices. And environmentalists must obey Hardin's famous ecological rule that "you cannot do only one thing," because in ecosystems all actions have unforeseen effects. Conservatives make the same warning about reform because of the complexity of traditional social practices. Hardin concludes, referring to Shepard's title: "Subversive ecologists can take pride in the fact that they are true conservatives" (Hardin 1985, 475).

What is "conservative" anyway? In abstract terms, conservatives want to prevent some change or maintain earlier ways. But the meaning of our political labels is tied to history. Those called "liberals" today are better called "egalitarian" or "progressive liberals," historically derivative of the progressive movement of the early twentieth century (in England, the "new liberalism"), which gained ascendancy in the New Deal. They evolved from nineteenth century, or classical liberals, who favour minimal government and a maximally free market. "Conservative" applies

¹ Shepard, who worked during summers in various national wildlands (see his 1953), was in 1958 banned by the National Park Service. He had led a group of seasonal naturalists in alerting the public to illicit logging in Olympic National Park. His unhappiness with the inaction of national conservation groups (he had been an officer of the National Council of State Garden Clubs and the Natural Resources Council) in the matter led him to resign from them (Lien 2001, 286-98).

² The terms "conservation" and "preservation" had different meanings in the early 20th century, referring respectively to the views of Gifford Pinchot and John Muir, the former recommending economic "multiple use" of national wild lands, the latter opposing it. (The "national forests" operated by the U.S. Forest Service under the Department of Agriculture, and the "national parks," operated by the National Park Service under the Department of the Interior, reflect that distinction.) Unlike them I am using "conservation" in a way implies "preservation."

to those classical liberals—or neoliberals, libertarians, or economic conservatives—and traditionalist, social, or “paleo” conservatives. The latter, who trace back to Edmund Burke’s critique of the French Revolution, oppose the attempt to remake inherited social structures by government (above all) or market (some of the time), are friendly to the stabilizing effect of religion, and have doubts about modern individualism.³ Progressives and classical liberals agree on modern progress, legal equality, and individualism but differ on the role of government in the economy, hence the balance of community good and individual economic liberty. Each two of the three—progressivism, classical liberalism, and conservatism—have areas of overlap, and may form surprising coalitions on any given issue.

Environmentalism has an ambiguous relation to this trinity because of the circumstances of its birth. In the United States it arose with progressivism in opposition to corporate interests or unchecked market activity that threaten the natural environment, to which government action is the solution. Teddy Roosevelt, arguably the first American environmentalist president, was an avowed progressive.⁴ Progressivism is about using government to change society to suit contemporary human needs and wants; the majority of environmentally concerned citizens, and activists, think of themselves as progressives. But environmentalists are often in the position of having to oppose such “progress” whenever it damages the natural or wild environment, as progress often does.

Now, to Shepard. A reasonable argument can be made that Shepard cannot be located on any contemporary political spectrum, so the charge of conservatism is bogus. He was a critic, not only of industrialism but agro-pastoralism, regarding hunter-gatherer societies as the natural and right form of human life. Shepard did not want our productive, economic culture to return to the nineteenth or the eighteenth century, but *at least* to the Upper Paleolithic, ten to fifty thousand years ago. Capitalism and socialism, the free market and the state, community versus individual rights—the main topics of debates between progressives, classical liberals, and conservatives—are modern problems he had no interest in adjudicating. His intervention is far below, or far earlier than, such disagreements.

³ “Paleo-conservative” has been used in recent decades by way of contrast with multiple forms of “neo-conservative.”

⁴ A further Theodore Roosevelt connection: in *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth, and Literature*, written with Barry Sanders, Shepard explains the origin of “teddy” bears. On a 1902 bear hunt Roosevelt refused to shoot an injured bear that fellow hunters had caught and tied to a tree for him (although the bear was euthanized later because of its injuries). After political cartoonists lampooned the event, a Brooklyn shop owner and toy manufacturer labelled the stuffed bears in his window “Teddy’s Bears,” eventually mass producing them.

Shepard made this clear in the previously unpublished “Radical Politics,” written in 1995, a year before his death. In his critique of the university as a hotbed of “ideology,” he has sympathy neither with “radicals” nor with “conservatives.” Liberals and radicals—he seems to think of radicals as extremist progressives—are mainly concerned with the distribution of the spoils of agro-industrial civilization, aiming to cut up the “pie” differently. Conservatives are “not nearly conservative enough.” The real issue for Shepard is ideology itself, which for him is the belief that individual humans are free to consciously take a position, a set of beliefs, that defines their identity. The opposite of ideology-formation is the recognition that our reality already has an intrinsic ecological value structure that imposes on us the “first social principle,” namely “compliance with the truly radical other: the constraints and obligations of the biological reality of ecosystem and planetary communities of Beings.” In short, humans do not make themselves. Ideology links with anthropocentrism, humanism, and progress. Shepard’s view is reminiscent of Heidegger’s critique of humanism (which Shepard knew well).

One might wonder, was Shepard an anarchist? (If he were, then he could not be a conservative, there being no “conservative anarchists.”) Anarchism is a modern doctrine that says there must be no state. It has always been linked to socialism. It would not be odd for Shepard to be an anarchist; there were no states or governments in hunter-gatherer societies. Indeed, is Shepard a critic of *the polis itself*? Since the first development of cities, and certainly since their conceptualization by Aristotle, the *polis* has always been a collection of thousands of citizens, divided hierarchically into classes—and perhaps freedmen versus slaves—organized to defend their town and outlying agricultural estates. The mobile form, pastoralism, was just as focused on power, warfare, ownership, distribution, and rank. One might say that in Shepard’s preferred world there would be no *polis*, hence no politics at all, which would make him sound a bit like Marx (about whom more below).⁵ Once again, one could argue Shepard has no recognizable place on our political spectrum, including conservatism.⁶

But there is more going on here. The themes of “Radical Politics” connect to a 1977 essay of his. There he made it clear that ideology, “the master myth of our time,” expresses “existential

⁵ For Marx there can be no politics in the communist society because there are no classes to create political interests. Marx considered hunter-gatherer societies “primitive communism.” Shepard’s view of cynegetic society is more nuanced: there is group property (land), shared property (game from communal hunts), and private property (tools, clothing, huts, jewelry, etc.). We could say politics exists as the decision-making among members.

⁶ Shepard’s relation to feminism might be illustrative. In his later works (e.g. his 1998) he was at pains to claim patriarchy is the product of pastoralism, and employed Ivan Illich’s notion “vernacular gender” to say that while hunter-gatherer societies did assign men and women different roles, the roles were roughly equal in power and not rigid, unlike agro-pastoral societies. So Shepard actively tried to deny that his view could be located on the contemporary political spectrum, e.g. anti-feminist vs. feminist, patriarchal vs. matriarchal.

relativism” (Shepard 1977, 165). Modern humanism makes humans not only the most valuable entities, but the sole judges of value on Earth; modern ethics (utilitarianism and deontology, e.g. Kant) place no nonhuman limits on human moral choice; and liberal/progressive politics (nineteenth or twentieth century) make human individuals the only bearers of rights and morally relevant interests. The cultural relativism of the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century, while an improvement on colonialism and racism, make every cultural group the ultimate judge of their lifestyle. The modern humanist, progressive, liberal tendency is to see all determinism, all limits on freedom, as injustice.

Ecology cannot tolerate this. It asserts *nonhuman normative limits* on human action. There are “givens,” value-facts that structure human life because human life is ecosystemic, part of a whole. Some things are determined. We have a genome, and it evolved under certain pressures in certain places and times to produce a phenotype. To take one of Shepard’s examples: goat pastoralism is and was always wrong, having “given the world a five thousand year lesson in environmental catastrophe” (Shepard 1977, 162). Any culture widely depending on it was mistaken. No culture is free to value as they please.

An even older paper openly courts political language, albeit from a nonhuman viewpoint: Shepard’s 1964 “The Corvidian Millennium; or, Letter from an Old Crow.” Shepard has a crow—corvids were a favourite study of his—advise humans on the reorganization of their society. The crow points out the problem of human overcrowding and the mistake of year-round copulation. It insists that society must be organized in a “dominance-hierarchy” in which low-status individuals are pecked by high ranking members until they assume their proper place, meaning less desirable access to resources and mates. The crow sees this as a better and more compassionate than human economic stratification. There is “no crime” in the crow society, since stronger members are “responsible” to take from weaker members, and are subject to humiliation only if they fail.⁷ There is no “ethics” or, it seems, free will, for “all behaviours are responses to certain signals in the environment and are inherently patterned” (Shepard 1964, 81). This includes pecking to death “flock doormats,” the “most poorly integrated individuals” (Shepard 1964, 82). The true responsibility is to maintain the behaviours that have ensured the continuation of the population in its niche. The human concern to preserve the life of every member is “especially [upsetting for] tying up that much phosphorous and calcium” (Shepard 1964, 83). Shepard allows his crow to admit that the humans considered the corvid system “fascist” (Shepard 1964, 79).

⁷ Here we could recall Nietzsche, and, remembering the reference to Heidegger, note that when philosophers come up in this conversation, they tend to be conservatives.

This touches a political tripwire. Tom Regan, the animal rights advocate, once called Aldo Leopold's land ethic "fascist" (Regan 1983, 362). Others have warned of "ecofascism," and J. Baird Callicott felt it necessary to defend his and Leopold's views—mentioning Shepard in the process—against the fascism charge (Callicott 1999, Zimmerman 2004). Is Shepard flirting with fascism?

First of all, at no point does Shepard propose that we humans follow the crow's advice. We are humans, not crows. He is trying to be brutally honest in recognizing how far modern liberal society is from crow society. (And by implication, early *homo* society?) He is asking us to recognize the social "rules" of a sample nonhuman species. A worldview based in ecology cannot fail to do so. We humans can indeed choose to operate by different, novel rules, but we must recognize that they are novel, and bear the cost.

Second, the fascism charge has always been politically illiterate.⁸ Fascism is a form of twentieth century totalitarianism, a novel and inherently modernist form of politics in which all society is mobilized as a paramilitary organization by loyalty to a party which leads a government without limits on its power. It does not mean "any departure from post-World War II North Atlantic liberalism," any more than any step towards progressivism is a step towards Stalinism. Covid society, while presented as reasonable and caring in its way, rejects the equal rights of all adult members to life and procreation, and the value or interests of an individual, where they threaten the maintenance of society or ecosystem.⁹ To analogize crow to human politics, they are communitarian, or as Callicott puts it, "holist" (1989, 1999, *passim*). Like conservatism, holism or communitarianism holds against liberalism that society, sometimes conceived on analogy with an "organism," trumps individual liberties on certain occasions. But so does every departure from libertarianism (including progressivism on the left as much as nationalism on the right) and virtually every political philosophy from Plato to Hegel. If the choices are liberal, progressive, or conservative, it is hard to put Shepard's appreciation of the crow in any category but the last. But that has nothing to do with fascism.

⁸ There was indeed something that could be called "ecofacism" in Nazi Germany, as Zimmerman (2004) points out. But that was ecology attached to an actual fascist movement.

⁹ At a small environmental conference in the late 1980's I heard a prominent environmental philosopher say, publicly, that AIDS was nature's way of correcting aberrant behavior. The audience was shocked. I disagreed with the speaker, but I also doubted the audience's honesty about where their shared principles might lead. Applied solely to gays, the speaker's claim is bigotry. But a general refusal of medical treatment as interference with nature's (or God's) "right" or "destined" ways is merely anti-humanist. Whether it is right is another question.

Approaching from a different direction, what Shepard admires in his ideal or normative world and what he advocates in our historically depraved world, can be different. Shepard's preferred society is in the past (again, like a conservative, and unlike, for example, Marx). Shepard's prescriptions for what we should do with our contemporary, depraved world were first given in the conclusion to his 1973 *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, his first exploration of hunter-gatherer society. He advocated a "techno-cynegeticism," making the interesting point that the postmodern, post-industrial world might allow for more re-incorporation of elements of cynegetic society than early industrial or agricultural civilization. He attacked economy and social geography head on: populations should be moved to high density coastal high rises with most calories produced by the cultivation of bacteria in labs, continental interiors left wild for hunting-foraging. This "Jeremiah-Johnson-meets-Le Corbusier" solution is wildly unlikely of course. But the idea that post-industrial civilization might be more amenable to the pre-agrarian is intriguing, as we will see.

In the 1990's Shepard took a more meliorist tone. Rather than remaking economics and social organization, he suggested the point is to incorporate as many features of the cynegetic lifestyle as possible, recognizing many are impossible for most human beings. He did this both in the 1992 "Post-Historical Primitivism," and in the posthumous 1998 *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. In the latter he made clear that while he had long found the "garden" ecology movement of low-intensity sustainable agriculture inadequate, he admitted that he has "known all along that there is no way, literally for many people to achieve that final recovery of our truest being...And I know that simple farming with the protection of the immediate habitat is still possible for thousands of people—indeed, for millions... In the next-to-best of all possible worlds, I would welcome a triune of [Wendell] Berry, [Wes] Jackson, and [Gary] Snyder, empowered to take charge of the use of the continent... [which] would recover much of the best of the precivilized world of the Pleistocene" (Shepard 1998, 107).

So he listed 71 recommendations whose piecemeal adoption would aid our "long circle back toward [our] former coherence" (Shepard 1998, 170). But much in Shepard's list is more or less inconceivable, even if there were to be some future meeting point of a post-industrial economy running up against limits (global warming, overpopulation, etc.) and a political-cultural pressure towards environmental sustainability. I am less concerned with the obvious—no domesticated plants or animals, no monocultures, no fossil fuel use, social group limited to three thousand, no freehold land ownership or heritable property¹⁰—than with lifestyle changes that seem

¹⁰ The absence of freehold and inheritance would almost have to mean a modern socialism. But this, I believe, is Shepard taking sides in a fight he doesn't need to join.

utterly opposed to the direction of postmodern society: no sedentism; no reading prior to twelve years old; only handmade tools; limited exposure to strangers; no non-organic medicine; and no idea of progress. Our post-industrial society is going in the direction of a fluid economy, where people change roles and move all the time, where anyone without a highly symbolic-analytic education for learning new jobs, or who stays with their fire circle or neighbourhood group for very long, is likely condemned to economic marginality. Migrants we will be, but chasing jobs, not game. Living longer will be accompanied by ever more “non-organic” medicine. Removal of the idea of progress is hardly compatible with the “techno” side of “techno-cynegeticism.”

Ironically, something about Shepard’s 1973 recommendation was *more* plausible. Not the plan of relocation to coastal high-rises while continental interiors remain wild, but what that plan presupposes: a continuation of the modern economy, even capitalism, and technological improvement, in the daily lives of the vast majority of people, albeit with self-imposed limits and an encouragement to participate in the wild. That also has to imply a continuation of modern education, medicine, large chunks of modern culture, belief in progress, etc. That is, Shepard’s earlier rather bizarre suggestion presupposes not an abandonment of modern society and economy, but their transformation into a novel form that incorporates room for the wild.

Now, where does all this leave us? At one level, Shepard has to be a conservative. All forms of liberalism and progressivism are linked to a modern society of equal individual liberty, progress, and freedom of social values from any nonhuman dictates (i.e. from God or nature) or the past (i.e. the choice of the present generation, democracy, overrides the past). Paleo-conservatism is the term for those who question these in the name of preserving older, pre-modern modes of social life. For Shepard “The past is the formula for our being” (Shepard 1973, 260). That is *some* kind of paleo-conservatism.

But what kind? At the close of “Post-Historic Primitivism” he added another meliorist touch to widen the ring of who can participate in reclaiming the past: “We cannot become hunter-gatherers as a whole economy, but we can recover the ontogenetic moment. Can five billion people go hunting...? They can, because the value of the hunt is not in repeated trips but a single leap forward into the heart-structure of the world, the ‘game’ played to rules that reveal ourselves. What is important is to have hunted. It is like having babies; a little goes a long way” (Shepard 1992, 207).

Like a once-in-a-lifetime *haj* to Mecca? If so, then Shepard's central worry is not about nature. It is about us. What has always made Shepard unique among environmentalists, besides his critique of agro-pastoralism, is his deep concern with ontogenesis. We have not received the kind of upbringing and education humans are supposed to have, hence we don't value the right things. The hope is our genome, which still lies within, but it needs behaviour and cultural practices to draw it out: "the real cultural deficiency is the absence of a true *cultus*, with its significant relevant mythical cosmos, and artifacts" (Shepard 1969, 121). "*Cultus*" means not merely culture but a religious social group, where religion is not a matter of belief in doctrine but the totemic-animist-ecological religion of hunter-gatherers (Shepard 1973, 195).

How, then, can we go back? Spiritually. Shepard is in the end a *religious conservative*. Certainly he wants political action to preserve the wild and limit environmental destruction, and social change to encourage participation in the wild. But the practical application of Shepard's work can only be incorporated as a set of personal attitudes, ends, and private practices: his aim is a religious practice that expresses a totemic-ecological metaphysics. And it is inevitable that the degree of incorporation will have to vary: householders will visit the wild on Sundays, Saturdays, or Fridays, follow their dietary practices through the week, but otherwise live much like non-believers, while it is left to a few shaman or monastics to live in the wild or near-wild full-time. I am not belittling the content of Shepard's hopes, nor suggesting it is "easy" to follow his path. It is that, I think, he saw his role in a light that made him quite different from a political activist. Spiritual awakening and political reform are different enterprises.

As we saw, some worry that his kind of conservative environmentalism either is, or could be, politically anti-liberal (Regan 1983, Zimmerman 2004). They are right. The deep question is: are we to consider ourselves exceptions to the natural laws of evolution that put each in its place in an ecosystem, and society, and stay there, or not? Humanism, liberalism, and individualism must say YES. Environmentalism cannot answer with a simple yes. Some fear that a "no" would lead to "monstrous" implications (Zimmerman 2004). They are probably right. *But there are more than two answers*. There is also: "Yes, we can and should exempt ourselves but only up to a point, and that point is on a curve of possibilities dictated by nature."

For Shepard, *the meaning and value of my existence is destroyed by the belief in the centrality of my existence*. This is true of a number of religious traditions. Anthropocentrism, humanism, individualism, liberalism, and progressivism, in so far as they make the human individual the unique lynchpin of value, undermine the human individual's value. Shepard must reject modern liberal *thought*, which is to say, most of the historical intellectual foundations for liberal and progressive practices and institutions. But need he reject most modern liberal *practices or*

institutions? Not necessarily; there is more to political theory than is dreamt of by some environmental ethicists. For example, to assert, as “negative” liberals do, that on the basis of past experience, we believe limits on the power of groups over individuals, one ethnicity over another, states over persons, and the higher classes over the lower, are crucial to avoid monstrosity—and maybe environmental devastation—is probably compatible with Shepard’s view. Liberalism does not have to be based in individualism or even rights.¹¹ It is possible to put liberal, even progressive structures, inside a conservative view of nature, the individual, and the value of human existence.

For Shepard, rather than waiting for the future Great Society (progressivism), or the call of Being (Heidegger), or Zarathustra (Nietzsche), or a messiah’s first or second coming (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), the point is to achieve a personal life oriented around the proper object of reverence: the cycle of energy, or power, circulating through life forms on the surface of the Earth, a world *without progress or history*.¹² So, in terms of political ideas Shepard is as conservative as it is possible to be, but there is no clear line between his pre-historical conservatism and the thought of any modern political perspective. As a religious conservative he seeks to get as close as possible to what he regarded as the truly human way. His politics wheels about his religion, as Orion and the Great and Lesser Bear wheel about the North Star. And that relation is itself characteristic of conservatism.

* I thank Florence Shepard for her review of this paper.

¹¹ For negative liberalism see Judith Shklar’s “The Liberalism of Fear” (1989). Even Dewey, the arch-progressive, rejected *individualism* (as opposed to *individuality*). J.S. Mill accepted individual liberty but not rights. Michael Walzer’s theory of distributive justice, which dispenses with Rawlsian equality, has fairly been called “left-wing Burkeanism” (Carens 2000, 23).

¹² It is interesting to compare Shepard’s cynegetic world to Nietzsche’s concept of the “Eternal Return.” The latter was supposed to be the litmus test of a world without progress for an intellectual recognition of the complete absence of purpose. Nietzsche and Shepard’s hunter-gatherers share a cyclic, nonlinear notion of time. But Shepard’s cynegetic world is full of purpose, closer to the religious anthropology of Mircea Eliade’s *Cosmos and History* (1971).

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