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The Liberation of Nature?

Walter Benjamin's eleventh thesis on the philosophy of history contrasts exploitative labor with liberating labor. The contrast is familiar except that Benjamin refers not to the exploitation and liberation of human beings but of nature. He does not hesitate to give this unexpected application of Marxist categories its full utopian force. He writes that the Social Democratic

conception of labor amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naïve complacency is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat. Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound. According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labor, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials. (Benjamin 261)

The early Frankfurt School placed nature more and more at the center of its reflections as it lost hope in a socialist transformation. The publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* marked a turning point. Thereafter the question of nature played a major role in the work of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, only to disappear once Habermas and his followers again focused on the possibilities of progressive social change.

It seems to be a question of the priority of human relations vs. the relation of human beings and things. Adorno says something like this in "On Subject and Object." He criticizes as "shameful" the concept of communication as "imparting information between subjects" "because it betrays what is best—the potential for agreement between human beings and things." This is a peculiar phrase: in what sense can human beings and things "agree?" Adorno goes on to explain that "peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other" (Adorno 1998, 247). So, the sought-after agreement is to be understood as a kind of mutual "participation."

These passages occur in a speculative ellipsis Adorno "allows" himself exceptionally. He quickly moves on to other subjects without explaining properly what he means. When scattered passages throughout his work are pulled together, certain ideas come through that help to interpret his intent. Nature and history are not independent of each other, but must be understood in their inseparable connection. Human beings are not only spectators of

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nature but as natural beings they themselves belong to it. In modern societies a historically sedimented “second nature” of dead conventions and institutions occupies the place of mythic fate that unmastered nature once occupied for primitive peoples. Natural beauty, especially where human artifacts have been harmoniously integrated into it, prefigures a redemptive future in which the “wounds” of nature will be healed and life will flourish in peace. Nature, in one of Adorno’s interpretations, thus holds a utopian promise.

Adorno never related this promise to environmental issues which only entered post-war public discussion toward the end of his life. However, Marcuse did address ecology explicitly in terms that appear to follow directly from Adorno’s elliptical remarks. As usual, Marcuse enthusiastically breaches Adorno’s self-imposed limits, and this makes for a more explicit and decisive presentation. In a 1972 speech, he wrote that nature “has a dimension *beyond* labor, a symbol of beauty, of tranquility, of a non-repressive order.” Yet this nature is being destroyed by capitalism. “The power of capital is extended over the space for release and escape represented by nature. This is the totalitarian tendency of monopoly capitalism: in nature, the individual must find only a repetition of his own society; a dangerous dimension of escape and contestation must be closed off” (Marcuse 2005, 174). The revolution must therefore liberate not only human beings, but nature as well. I want to discuss this notion of a “liberation of nature” here and consider how this aspect of the Frankfurt School’s reflections might be continued today.

Marcuse knew that the utopian conception of nature he shared with Adorno appears remarkably unscientific, even regressive. But these were resolutely modern thinkers who resisted theoretical backsliding. They were not looking to re-enchant nature or to merge with it in a romantic unity. Yet Marcuse linked his argument directly to several surprising comments in Adorno’s *Aesthetics* that appear to contradict the modern view. There Adorno claimed that human beings are called “to help nature ‘to open its eyes,’ to help it ‘on the poor earth to become what perhaps it would like to be’” (Marcuse 1972, 66). Marcuse sought a non-teleological interpretation of such notions, a third term beyond premodern essentialism and the idealistic kitsch of a “new age.”

He found his answer in an aspect of Kant’s aesthetics, the definition of natural beauty as “purposiveness without purpose.” Nature exhibits characteristics of an object constructed to achieve a purpose without actually having been so constructed and without actually having a purpose. Marcuse interpreted purposiveness in this sense as a purely formal property of self-organizing objects. It arises from freedom, the self-production of the object according to its own intrinsic nature, its growth potential. Presumably, we

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can distinguish the freely developed living thing from the mutilated product of a constricted growth process. The distinction manifests itself in formal properties we associate with health and beauty. Here is a non-teleological concept that can support a normative understanding of nature and its tendencies.

But exactly how is this supposed to work? Adorno considered this idea and drew utopian conclusions from it but stopped short of accepting its literal truth. He wrote that natural beauty “recollects a world without domination, one that probably never existed” (Adorno 1997, 66). Natural beauty hints at the idea of freedom that corresponds to such a world. But, Adorno concluded, nature is in reality a realm of unfreedom and so the aesthetic appreciation of nature is deceptive, a suggestive misapprehension.

Marcuse took a different tack. Natural beauty and its purposeless purposiveness express the flourishing of life. This is a value humans share in different ways with all of life. But unlike other living things, humans are able to conceive the potentialities of things and of themselves. They can, in Marx’s astonishing phrase, “form things in accordance with the laws of beauty” (quoted in Marcuse 1972, 67).

Marcuse developed Marx’s brief mention of beauty as an objective characteristic of the real—it has “laws”—in terms of a quasi-Freudian theory of the erotic. He argued that the erotic impulse is directed toward the preservation and furtherance of life. It is not merely an instinct or drive but operates in the sensuous encounter with the world that reveals it in its beauty, the objective correlate of the erotic. But this impulse is repressed by society, partially sublimated, partially confined to sexuality. The loss of immediate sensory access to the beautiful gives rise to art as a specialized enclave in which we perceive the trace of erotic life affirmation.

Marcuse argued that human beings can favour the life-enhancing forces in nature and bring about the harmonious co-existence of human and natural life. He did not carry this argument to its “biocentric” *reductio ad absurdum*. He recognized that human flourishing harms many other living things, but he believed that in favoring life insofar as possible, human beings also create a favorable environment for their own flourishing.

Concepts such as these have an intuitive appeal. It is obvious that strip-mining wounds nature in Adorno’s sense in contrast with the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright which is far more compatible with the unfolding of the potentialities of its living setting. But is this more than a sentimental preference? “Nature” in one form or another goes on regardless of what human beings feel and do. Why single out its flourishing around a Renaissance palace neatly tucked into the landscape, or Wright’s *Falling Water*? Nature “flourishes” in a garbage can too, especially one uncollected for a week, but this is not the affirmation of life we recognize as normatively valid. Does

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this mean our intuitive understanding of life affirmation is an arbitrary and subjective opinion without normative force? Not necessarily.

There is a difference between our intuitions and the counterexample insofar as the former seem to be rooted in our nature and are generally shared while the latter is a mere intellectual construction set up for the sake of argument. To call the multiplication of bacteria in a garbage can an example of flourishing is to mistake the emphatic meaning we normally give the term. What “flourishes” is not simply a mass of cells but the realization of such values as vitality and grace through the free development of living things in which we recognize a certain family resemblance or affinity. The concept is necessarily anthropocentric if it is to have any force at all. A garden or a child “flourishes”; bugs merely multiply.

Marcuse assumed this distinction in arguing that a liberated human “sensitivity” recognizes the “existential . . . truth in things, in nature” (Marcuse 1972, 69). This “truth” is existential in the sense that it is experiential rather than scientific. The fact that experience is always *our* experience and not that of an imaginary pure rationality means its anthropocentric character is unsurpassable. But this does not disprove its cognitive value. Rather, it is the condition of another kind of knowledge. Experience in this sense offers a non-scientific truth.

This truth is not just an idea but is “existential,” manifest in the inherently normative character of experience itself. We do not perceive the world as scientific reason apprehends it, as a meaningless order of primary qualities in abstract space and time. The “secondary qualities” belong essentially to the sensed world, and these include the objects of lived “judgments” of good and bad, beautiful and ugly experienced directly in the act of sensation. According to Marcuse, a concrete “libidinal” attachment to the world underlies this normative dimension of sensation. This attachment is historically variable, restricted by scarcity in the past, and suffering a peculiar reduction to sexuality in the present. Its full realization as a mode of presence awaits a liberated society (Marcuse 1964, 73). Pleasure in beauty would then express a generally life-affirming sensitivity. Beauty would relate the given to its potentialities in sensation, rather than serving as a temporary escape from competitive strife.

In one of his last speeches, in 1979, Marcuse developed this conception in its implications for environmental struggle. He argued that ecological devastation is an effect of capitalist productivity against which the “life instincts” rebel:

What we have is a politicization of erotic energy. This, I suggest, is the distinguishing mark of the most radical movements today. These movements do not . . . constitute a struggle to replace one power structure with another. Rather, these radical movements

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are existential revolts against an obsolete reality principle. They are a revolt carried by the mind and body of individuals themselves. . . . A revolt in which the whole organism, the very soul of the human being, becomes political. A revolt of the life instincts against organized and socialized destruction. (Marcuse 1992, 37)

Disgust and rage at the abuse of human beings is an “aesthetic” expression of our sensitivity to the value of suppressed potentialities. It articulates that value at the existential level. At that level the subject does more than observe the given state of affairs; she participates in it vicariously. This is the other side of the coin of mutual participation in which Adorno found the meaning of peace. On Marcuse’s account participation is experienced as solidarity. A similar disgust and rage at harm to the environment would inspire its less destructive appropriation within the human world. He argued that the emergence of such a sensibility in the New Left foreshadowed the possibility of a different relation to nature.

I believe that here we are at the core of what the early Frankfurt School can contribute to contemporary environmental debates. It has nothing to say about the important technical questions we now face, but it offers a unique approach to such issues in environmental philosophy as the value of nature. By reorienting the question around aesthetic experience, it suggests a way of transcending the antinomy of objectivism and subjectivism, fact and value. On this basis it conceives a utopian vision of a life-affirming form of individuality and the corresponding politics and society. And a vision is certainly needed as modern societies head straight for environmental disaster along the old familiar paths of productionism and consumerism.

But we cannot conclude this discussion without also noting the limitations of this approach. I want to mention three of these limitations briefly. They have to do with the Frankfurt School’s evaluation of the media and technology and its concept of experience.

The Frankfurt School is identified with a theory of media manipulation. It would be foolish to deny the partial truth of this very negative assessment of the media. Certainly, for men who witnessed Hitler’s use of the techniques of modern propaganda, much contemporary reflection on the agency of shoppers and television viewers would have seemed ridiculous. But there are certainly problems with the Frankfurt School approach. The dismissal of all mass cultural products as pure expressions of capitalism not only smacks of mandarin elitism—a commonplace charge—but also makes for difficulties in interpreting progressive movements.

As a result, there is a lack of mediation in Marcuse’s theory of the new sensibility. He seems to have believed that the contrast between the reality and the potential of advanced societies is obvious and that the media are responsible for the widespread failure to recognize this fact. But at the time

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he was writing there were also mass cultural products that stimulated the critical consciousness of the 1960s radicals. I can recall a veritable flowering of dystopianism, especially in the European cinema. Films such as *La Dolce Vita* and *Alphaville* denounced the technological society coming into being in the post-war world. A subversive counterculture was emerging around jazz, poetry and folk music, and this counterculture gradually reached the mainstream.

What tensions within the mass culture opened the breach through which the New Left was able to march and grow? What are the similar tensions today that spread environmental awareness and prepare a response to the environmental crisis? Questions such as these require more nuanced media theories. New approaches have been proposed by theorists who draw on the Frankfurt School for inspiration without following slavishly in its footsteps (for example, Kellner 1995; Gunster 2004).

Next consider the question of technology. The atmosphere surrounding the critique of technology in Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse is heavy with dystopian *Angst*. But they were not technophobes. Rather, they blamed capitalism for the disastrous development of technology. There are occasional passages in the works of Adorno and Horkheimer in which they hint at the possibility of a non-dominating technology. For example, Adorno writes:

It is not technology which is calamitous, but its entanglement with societal conditions in which it is fettered Considerations of the interests of profit and dominance have channeled technical development: by now it coincides fatally with the needs of control. Not by accident has the invention of means of destruction become the prototype of the new quality of technology. By contrast, those of its potentials which diverge from dominance, centralism and violence against nature, and which might well allow much of the damage done literally and figuratively by technology to be healed, have withered. (Adorno 2000, 160-161, nt. 15)

Similar ideas were given fuller development by Marcuse, particularly in *One-Dimensional Man*. There Marcuse called for a new science and technology of liberation based on a new mode of experience of nature in a free society. He offered interesting suggestions concerning the role of the imagination in the reconstruction of technological rationality and the technical base. But none of these positive suggestions were elaborated to the point where they carry conviction. The implausibility of the positive in the Frankfurt School's evaluation of technology simply reinforces the impression that only its negative critique was seriously meant.

Marcuse claimed that the problem with modern technology stemmed

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from its value neutrality. He argued that the formalistic, quantitative rationality of modern science was incompatible with the concept of potentiality or essence. But without some such concept, all value is expelled from the scientific conception of nature. Values appear as merely subjective and no difference of principle distinguishes a preference for wealth and power from the needs of the mass of humanity. Modern scientific-technical rationality is thus adjusted in some sense to its destiny as the basis for the domination of human beings and nature, the intrinsic potentialities of which it ignores.

This critique was explicitly derived from phenomenological considerations in Husserl and Heidegger. They argued that scientific-technical reason is abstracted from the lifeworld and hence from the secondary qualities present in immediate experience. Marcuse took up this argument and extended it through a consideration of its implications for technology under capitalism. In this he comes perilously close to Heidegger, whose critique of technology also derives practical consequences from the structure of scientific-technical rationality. Both draw dystopian conclusions from the triumph of modern reason.

These arguments are suggestive but we can do better today. Very radical changes in both the experience of technology and its understanding in the academic world open new paths. Environmentalism, the Internet, and many struggles around a variety of technologies have broken the dystopian spell and restored confidence in human agency in ways unanticipated by the Frankfurt School. We must draw on these experiences to situate its important contribution in the context of a satisfactory philosophy of technology able to address the environmental crisis (Feenberg 1999).

Marcuse's critique of value neutrality is not entirely compatible with contemporary views but it can be reformulated in a way that preserves his essential point. Recent study of technology shows that it does in fact incorporate values despite its appearance of neutrality. But the values are "translated" into technical specifications and can only be identified in a social context or through historical reconstruction of the process of technical development in which various social actors determined design in accordance with their preferences. In this respect modern technology is no different from earlier craft technology. There is, however, a difference of another kind.

Consider value neutrality not as an achieved state of purity but as a tendency with a history. Indeed, the development of modern technology is accompanied by the gradual elimination of traditional values from technical practice. Those values were deeply rooted in a culture but the new valuative translations characterizing modern technology are rootless results of calculative economic strategies. The imperatives of the capitalist market underlie this tendency to free technology from craft values to a development oriented exclusively toward profit. Technical disciplines are made possible by this

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reduction, which eliminates most ethical and aesthetic mediations and orients practical knowledge toward a purely quantitative treatment of processes and materials.

Naturally, the pursuit of profit mediates real demands which continue to shape technical designs. To some extent these demands appear in the technical disciplines as well, as constraints or choices among technically underdetermined options. No complete value neutrality is ever achieved, but the tendency is toward a simplification of the valuative constraints on design. The less technology is invested with culturally secured values, the more easily it can be adapted to the changing conditions of the market. Hence the appearance of value neutrality of modern production, with its purified technical disciplines to which correspond standardized parts available for combination in many different patterns with different value implications.

Reformulated in these terms, Marcuse's argument suggests a quite definite future for technology under socialism. Technical disciplines and technologies would translate values related not just to profitability but more broadly to human and natural needs recognized in political debate. These values would be incorporated into the disciplines as principles guiding choices among possible designs, much as the healing mission of medicine guides it toward a value-based selection among the possibilities opened by knowledge of human biology.

The emergence of these new constraints should not be conceived as obstacles but as opportunities. The capacity for innovation would be challenged by these political demands much as it is challenged today by market demands. The situation Marcuse foresaw is anticipated by the regulation of technology where it imposes life-affirming standards independent of the market. We see the beginnings of something like this in relation to environmental standards. As these standards are internalized by the disciplines, what Marcuse called the "technological rationality" of the society is transformed. Socialism would represent a shift in the balance toward far more extensive regulation based on far more democratic procedures.

The most philosophically problematic limitation of the early Frankfurt School has to do with its concept of experience. This limitation is less obvious in Adorno and Horkheimer, who studiously avoid direct engagement with politics. They deplore the decline of experience in modern societies without offering a political alternative. It is thus easy to dismiss statements about nature such as Adorno's as metaphors or aphoristic exaggerations.

But in Marcuse, as in Benjamin, the utopian content of the idea of nature enters consciousness and shapes a progressive experience of the world. This leads Marcuse to the notion of aestheticized sensation. But he left us with only fragments of a theory and some of these fragments—the Freudian ones—are less plausible today than they were when he first proposed them.

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The suspicion remains that the ideas of a “new sensibility” and a “liberation of nature” merely describe ordinary political views and sentimental attitudes in overblown metaphors. From the standpoint of this critique, the Frankfurt School’s idea of nature is not a historically and philosophically significant alternative.

To counter that conclusion one would need to distinguish experienced nature from nature as an object of natural science and from purely cultural objects. Experienced nature would have to have an ontological status of some sort but exactly what sort remains to be determined. I have argued that Marcuse was blocked from addressing this problem by the Frankfurt School’s rejection of the heritage of phenomenological ontology (Feenberg 2005). This blockage had historical motives which resulted in Marcuse’s making a sharp break with his own early attempt at a synthesis of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology and the early Marx. The concept of experience Adorno borrowed from Benjamin and modified cannot do this work outside the realm of art, and Marcuse, who violated the restriction to art, never developed a viable alternative (Jay 2005, chap. 8).

Marcuse’s Freudian concept of libidinal attachment to reality was supposed to make the leap beyond art to politics. But this appears to be a psychological concept occupying the place of a philosophical justification for the utopian idea of participation in things Adorno allowed himself briefly to evoke in the passage cited at the beginning of this discussion. If the recognition of life by life is nothing more than a “positive attitude” toward nature, it is not an “existential truth” and of no special interest to philosophy, however significant it might be for encouraging sound environmental policy.

The key problem is thus the ontological status of lived experience. The nature of natural science is totally disenchanted. It has no room for teleology, for the erotic, for any preference for life over death. Like Melville’s white whale, it is bleached of value and so invites subjective projections of every sort in the form of ever more powerful technologies serving ever more violent ends. Against this background, lived experience is increasingly devalued in modern times. It appears to be without epistemic credentials or ontological significance.

Marcuse rejected the privilege of nature in this scientific sense. Lived experience is not a subjective overlay on nature as natural science understands it. It reveals dimensions of reality that science cannot apprehend in its present form. These dimensions, beauty, potentialities, essences, life as a value, are just as real as electrons and tectonic plates. The imagination which projects these dimensions is thus not a merely subjective faculty but reveals aspects of the real.

But there is an ambiguity in Marcuse’s approach which shows up particularly in his rather vague demand for a new science that would discover

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value in the very structure of its objects. Did he wish to re-enchant the nature of natural science, to attribute qualities such as beauty to it that contemporary science does not recognize? This is the most contentious interpretation of Marcuse's thought, but it is not entirely justified by the texts.

There is a more plausible interpretation. According to this alternative, experience is valorized not in opposition to modern science but as an alternative ontological field which co-exists with science and claims its own rights and significance. This seems to be the implication of Marcuse's rejection of any return to a "qualitative physics." On this account science might very well evolve in new directions through genuine discoveries stimulated by life in a liberated society. But no one can anticipate, much less dictate, the science of the future. More significant for Marcuse's theory would be the evolution of experience, reshaped by resistance and ultimately by freedom. This evolution would release the aesthetic imagination from its marginal role under capitalism to a central place in the reconstruction of the technology and the world it supports. The philosophical task Marcuse did not, unfortunately, undertake would be to delimit the spheres of science and experience so as to avoid confusion between the two different kinds of truth.

This alternative corresponds to the phenomenological approach as it is explained in thinkers such as Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty. They did not endorse a regressive re-enchantment of nature but defended the multiplicity of points of view on reality. This operation requires a critique of the "view from nowhere" in order to validate the specifically engaged perceptions of a finite being in the world, an embodied being that belongs to a community.

Interpreted in this way, it makes sense to claim that the perceived potentialities of objects have a kind of reality. As I argued earlier, there are important domains of experience to which we bring a normative awareness quite apart from opinions and intellectual constructions. Lived experience of the real is not confined to the empirically given but frequently refers beyond it to essential potentialities it more or less fulfills. Things are given "in" a form that is attuned to the subject's disposition and vice versa, and not as indifferent physical objects "invested" with subjective associations by a psychological subject. The phenomenological correlation of subject and object preserves their distinctness while testifying to their mutual implication. This "two-dimensional" nature of experience could be extended to form the basis of the political discrimination Marcuse substitutes for the traditional Marxist notion of class consciousness.

Both Adorno and Marcuse rejected phenomenology as incompatible with their historical standpoint but I find buried, perhaps unconscious, links to phenomenology in their attempts to grant the experience of nature a philosophical role (O'Connor 2004, 157-158). Because they failed to develop these links, they fell between two stools, psychology and philosophy.

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Adorno seems to have been content with the ambiguity. Marcuse found a very unorthodox interpretation of Freud useful for linking his concept of nature with his political theory. But we may prefer to pursue the Frankfurt School's insight into nature by a different path. For this purpose, I believe it worth looking again at the contribution of phenomenology.

In recent years the concept of experience has been largely purged from philosophy under the influence of post-structuralism and Habermas's communication theory. These approaches triumphed in a period of relative social peace in which reforms appeared possible. But the rejection of experience they presuppose rests on a straw man: the notion that experience as a category necessarily involves romantic immediacy. An alternative conception would recognize the social mediation of experience without eliminating its existential weight in the vaporware of language and culture. The program for developing such a concept was announced by the early Frankfurt School, but not carried out.

Unfortunately the most influential inheritors of the Frankfurt School today have dropped this program which is so important for linking its original contribution to the politics of the environment. When later Critical Theory turned away from the problematic of nature to exclusively social concerns it lost the ability to address environmental issues. But in the age of environmental crisis it is becoming increasingly clear that the one cannot be separated from the other. Perhaps the further development of the early concept of nature in the Frankfurt School can provide a basis for a synthesis.

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