

Tales Of A Recovering Misanthrope

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Lately, charges of racism have been leveled at the environmental movement. Rather than building bridges between our movement and the movements of people of color, walls such as cultural insensitivity and white supremacy are being constructed. Meanwhile, the destruction of the Earth accelerates, and worldwide, people of color continue to be exploited and killed outright in what Zapatista Subcommandante Marcos has termed the “Fourth World War.” This war is the result of globalizing capitalism which frees corporations from governmental restrictions such as environmental and human rights laws. It is a worldwide environmental, cultural and racial holocaust being promoted by the US government for the benefit of the corporate elite.

Corporations, in order to compete in a global capitalist world, conduct environmentally destructive activities on the lands of the poorest and most politically marginalized groups. This means that the brunt of pollution and environmental degradation occurs in towns or neighborhoods comprised of the poor or on the homelands of traditional peoples. For this reason, alliances between the environmental movement and movements of the poor and dispossessed should be simple and natural.

To a large degree, I believe, cultural insensitivity stems from privilege. The environmental movement is predominately made up of privileged people. This is what allows them the luxury of being involved in the protection of ecological systems and not worried about daily survival. It can be threatening to acknowledge one’s privilege if one is an environmentalist because if that privilege is part of the system destroying the planet, it must be given up. It is more comfortable to point the finger elsewhere and adopt a misanthropic worldview— blaming all mankind. If all mankind is to blame, then we need not address issues of privilege, class or race.

When I was a teenager, I was deeply misanthropic. I loved nature and spent as much time as possible out of doors. But at night, I would look out the window at the Burger King across the street, at the gas stations on all sides, at the noisy, stinking stream of traffic, and I would loathe humanity, dreaming of its demise. When I found Earth First!, the campfire Chants of “Billions are living that should be dead” or “fuck the human race” appealed to me. Yes, I thought, humans are a cancer on the Earth. But I was wrong.

Misanthropy is a manifestation of the nature/ human split. This view has brought our society to the brink of extinction by assuming that we can run roughshod upon the Earth without impacting ourselves because we are somehow separate. Misanthropic Earth-centered activism is a total contradiction. One cannot be earth-centered and yet hate one’s own species. This dualism dooms the environmental movement to failure. We must break through the brainwashing to see the world as it truly is—deeply complex and beautiful, interwoven and interdependent—and to see our place in it.

Judi Bari, in her article, “Why I am not a Misanthrope,” from *Timber Wars*, explains, “Technocratic man, with his linear view of the world, tends to see tribal societies as earlier, less evolved forms of his own society, rather than as alternative, simultaneously existing methods of living on the Earth. The presumption is that, given time, these

cultures would somehow be corrupted like ours. But there is no evidence whatever that these ancient civilizations would have changed without our violent intervention.”

Humanity is not the problem. The privileged patriarchal ruling elite with their unsustainable systems of accumulation and domination perpetuated through insidious psychological manipulations and outright blunt force, are the problem. The rest of us are resources for them to exploit in the same way that they exploit the forests and the oceans. Certainly, some blame lies with the hoards practicing active apathy, but we cannot possibly blame traditional native peoples, nor the starving dispossessed, for the destruction of the Earth.

So I am enraged when I hear the intolerant assertions that come from the middle or upper middle class white activists who demand that we restrict the borders to refugees from the South. They seem unconcerned about developing an analysis of why or what the people are fleeing and uninterested in addressing issues of economic imperialism or US overconsumption. (US citizens consume 70 times the resources of the average “Third World” citizen, with most of these resources having been stolen from the “Third World ..”) In addition, these activists are apparently oblivious to the fact that, as descendants of immigrants, closing an artificial border to a predominately native population to our South is hypocritical.

And there are those, such as Paul Watson, who defend their right to align themselves with “political maverick” racists, with no regard for the fact that such an alliance against Native Americans would

likely lead to a backlash, endangering not only that issue but the movement as a whole. It is simpler to blame native people for participating in a corporate venture without looking into the history of colonialist oppression and cultural destruction that left them with few economic alternatives.

Of course, not all members of indigenous society are exempt from the destructive behaviors white culture has injected. When a culture is engulfed in colonialist oppression for generations, some of the traits of the oppressor are bound to be assimilated in that culture. The misanthropy and privilege (skin color and class) of our movement blocks people of color from trusting us. Can traditional peoples whose cultural identity has been a holistic perspective of oneness with the Earth become involved with a movement which views humans as a cancer? Can people whose history has been one of racial oppression reach out to one which is so glaringly privileged and white?

Making these alliances requires we reach out first to build trust. It means working for cultural understanding and true solidarity. In Vermont, we started by supporting the struggles of the Abenaki in order to make an alliance. We worked hard to support their fight against the state for their ancestral right to fish. The result: We have Abenaki representation on our working group, Abenaki presence at most of our protests, and we have been adopted by the tribe, which in turn has facilitated alliances with other native nations.

As ecologists we know that everything in the natural world is connected. We also know that the more diverse an ecosystem is, the better it is able to withstand adverse

conditions. Why is it so difficult to understand. that these lessons also apply to our movement? If we dig deeply to find the true roots of various oppressions, we find that they all lead to the same source: the corporate, capitalist, patriarchal elite who rule our society. For this reason, our movements must unite. When we are able to stop the perpetual inane bickering and honor our strength as a diversely unified whole, we will become a force to be reckoned with.

Martin Luther King was assassinated when he moved outside of the traditional civil rights movement to organize the working class and beyond that to speaking out against the Vietnam War. Judi Bari was bombed when she successfully unified mill workers and Earth First!ers. The Palmer Raids and FBI were used to destroy the massive movement of anarchists, wobblers and workers in the US that joined forces in the early 1900s. These links terrify the ruling elite.

Our efforts in Vermont to link ecological and social issues paid off when Champion and Monsanto teamed up to spray toxic herbicides on Vermont's forests. Our social justice allies stood with us to demand a ban on these toxic applications. The fury was so deep that the legislature had to side with the people. The spraying was stopped.

Our solidarity with activists from the South fighting globalization to save their homelands, coupled with a deeper economic analysis of what "First World" countries are doing to "Third World" countries through globalized capitalism and economic pressure, such as World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), has clearly illustrated the link between destruction of the Earth and genocide against native peoples. To protect the Earth, we must support the struggles of the Earth's indigenous and peoples of color. We must fight here in the "Belly of the Beast" to end the Fourth World War.

As the corporations of the world increasingly operate without borders and across issues, the movement must respond in kind. The compartmentalization of our organizations facilitates the rampant planetary destruction by keeping us marginalized and ineffective. The Vietnam War was ended when people from all walks used every tool available to stop the war machine. From soldiers fragging officers to militants fighting in the streets to student sit-ins to strategic anti-war bombings, the machine had to stop when it could neither predict the next move of the populace nor keep it divided.

So when Paul Watson makes alliances with Jack Metcalfe, known throughout Native American circles as a hard-core Indian-hater, on an issue involving Native American sovereignty; when Dave Foreman announces that AIDS and famines will help reduce overpopulation among people of color in the "Third World"; when Farley Mowat and Brock Evans (and Dave Foreman and Paul Watson) endorse an initiative that would restrict immigration by the Fourth World War refugees to our South, they enable the further destruction of our planet by reinforcing the walls between the privileged white environmental movement and the world's oppressed peoples.

The movements of the "Third World" are extremely powerful. People in the South clearly understand the interconnection of issues. When a Mayday march is called for in Mexico City, hundreds of thousands participate. The Zapatista's struggle for land, justice and food as well as for protection of the Lacandon rainforest. Instead of alien-

ating people of color, the privileged white US environmental movement needs to learn from other movements.

Activists wishing to organize internationally based on these revolutionary ecological principles are invited to contact Anne Petermann POB 57, Burlington, VT 05402; nfnena@sover.net.

Appendix: In Defense of Misanthropy

by Ohm Speckled Moonbeam and Phil Werrei

“Tales of a Recovering Misanthrope” by Anne Petermann in the June/July *EF! Journal* serves as a very illustrative example of how guilt-ridden, upper class enviros patronize and romanticize dispossessed peoples in general, and the indigenous of the world and working class in particular, to the detriment of all parties concerned.

The upper class bastions of our movement love nothing more than glorifying the “brown” peoples of the world, who, as every graduate of prestigious east coast universities knows, all live(d) in absolute harmony with nature, talking to animals and dancing around in egalitarian anarchic bliss. Likewise, they love nothing more than tossing around their antiquated Marxist notions of a revolutionary working class that hasn’t existed on this continent for more than 60 years. At the same time, our fearless leaders take the silver spoon out of their mouths and with unprecedented historical audacity, try and point the blame for the global situation on all of Northern society, including the ever so shit upon working class they claim to care for so dearly.

Well guess what? Not all indigenous cultures feature(d) “a holistic perspective of oneness with the Earth” or each other. (The poster children of the woo-brained, the Maya, practiced human sacrifice, slavery and genocide up through Spanish colonization and levied incredible destruction on the land around them. In my bioregion, the Klamaths had a knack for slaughtering surrounding tribes, enslaving their women and burning their land.) Furthermore, to suggest that the culpability for global economic pillage rests equally on the shoulders of all Northern society is a tremendous crime against truth and is remarkably indicative of the lack of class analysis in our movement.

A blatant example of how far removed upper class tree buggers are from the realities of the working class in this nation, much less any other, is seen when Petermann states, “So I am enraged when I hear the intolerant assertions that come from the middle or upper middle class activists who demand that we restrict the borders to refugees from the south.” Too bad none of the guys down at the mill share her sentiments. Nor the guys on the forestry crews I’ve worked on. Nor the carpenters, janitors, landscapers, factory workers or any other working class people who have watched their wages drop by more than 50 percent and see a bleaker future on the horizon thanks to additional players in the already tight competition for a finite numbers of jobs. And it sure ain’t the bosses of big business who are cussing “them wetback spies” and calling

for the borders to be locked down. In fact, the corporations can't wait for hundreds of thousands of desperate (read: easily exploitable) workers to come into northern workplaces on the NAFTA wave. They will work for a third the money in half the conditions and help destroy the already atrophied remains of organized labor in the North. Of course, it is terribly intolerant of the working class not to be benevolent, wanting to give what little economic security we and our families have to *nuestro amigos del Sur*. The upper class people in our midst can feel righteous indignation in their tolerance about uninterrupted immigration as they sacrifice nothing in the deal. Yeah, I know, we are all hypocrites. Our relatives immigrated here (more in chains than the yuppies would like to admit) and we are unwilling to voluntarily switch positions with the thousands of refugees coming up from the economic imperialism of the South. But what the hell else can we do?

I've lived in Mexico, Chiapas, Nicaragua and El Salvador. I understand the plight of the Third World first hand. I lived, worked and slept with the very peoples the upper class heroes claim to represent, and I can honestly say that the working class in the United States is just as fucked by the bowel movements of transnational capital as any *campesinos* in the south. Rather than blaming intangible "privileged patriarchal ruling elites" while implicitly distributing the guilt for third world oppression universally over northern society and granting a monopoly of suffering to romanticized cultures far away, perhaps we had better examine the effects of the neoliberal model on our own country, our own people and our own communities.

The cogs of global capital are tearing us apart. From the forests of southern Oregon to the jungles of Chiapas, from Flint and Youngstown, to the *Maquilas* of Sonora and Chihuahua, the forces are the same. And the victims are the same. The poor. Unlike the guilt mongering upper crust would like us to believe, the talons of neoliberalism are not actively racist. They do not deliberately seek out brown, red or yellow people to destroy out of some eugenic hatred for divergent gene pools. The forces of global capital most painfully hit the areas that are the poorest and most easily exploitable, be it *Indios* in Chiapas, hillbillies in Appalachia or Southern Oregon, factory workers in Taiwan or peasants in sub-Saharan Africa.

These victims are not so much the victims of what race they were born into, but what class. Not all Mexicans are oppressed Indians trying desperately to flee to the North. Not all Indonesians, Nigerians or Tibetans are wretched victims of genocide. It is high time for our exceedingly well educated movement to stop trying to melt complex issues of gray into tidy black and white answers that appease our own guilty white psyches. Yes, in a number of ways, race and culture are class, but to strictly focus on matters of race while ignoring the overwhelming dominance of class issues in deciding the fate of the world is to levy a discredit to us, to our suffering "comrades" and to the truth.

Rather than romanticizing the "dispossessed of the world" to the point of absurdity while simultaneously scapegoating the oppressed in one's own country, we need to see

and act upon the connections we share and not allow the feel-good rhetoric of guilt ridden conciliation to drive more substantial wedges between us.

“Tales of a Recovering Misanthrope” is right about the demographics of Earth First!, but has the reasons wrong. Earth First! is indeed a movement primarily composed of upper middle class and higher white folks who are so removed from the trenches in the war for survival that they can care for trees and fuzzy bunnies. However, neither this fact, nor the fact that the movement as a whole has not reached out to minority groups, justifies the implicit accusation that the movement is racist. Rather, Earth First! has traditionally been concerned with defending the last remaining wild places of our nation, which as a matter of fact, not of choice, tend to be located in extremely rural areas. So why not extend ourselves into more environmental justice issues in cities to help colorize our movement? Because we logistically can’t. We can scarcely win the issues we already work on. Not to mention, for many of us concerned with keeping ecosystems and wild areas intact, trying to preserve already annihilated urban ecosystems is fighting something of a lost cause. If this were a perfect world, it would be wonderful if Earth First! had the numbers and resources to launch successful campaigns in both rural and urban areas and could ethically raise the rainbow flag of diversity over its movement. But it can’t. We are up against the fucking wall desperately trying to preserve what little of our original planet is left. Every year we watch as our tactics grow increasingly less effective and our favorite ecosystems are hauled off by truck and ship. Are we supposed to back off and allow our beloved lands to be slashed and burned because we feel guilty for being too privileged and too white? Fuck that. I am damn glad that there are a few hundred upper class white kids that can go sit in redwoods for a year and lock down to trucks and cop cars and blockade logging roads.

We should look to other movements for knowledge and experience. We should do our best to align ourselves in solidarity with movements with similar enemies. We should not allow our habits and attitudes to alienate ourselves from other cultures and movements. But neither should we allow ourselves to get caught up in the racist pleasure of exaggerating the merits of other cultures while simultaneously beating ourselves to death in a fit of masochistic slander and guilt-ridden accusations.

And leave my misanthropy out of it. I am a misanthrope not because I hate AIDS ridden Africans or the Salvadoran *campesino*, but because I see my species, myself and my family included, as one that has been permitted to expand far beyond its means for sustainable survival within an intact ecosystem. My misanthropy comes not from an enhanced version of the “man/nature” split as Anne and Judi Bari assume, but from the fact that I see the interconnectedness between my race and nature and unfortunately, the horrors that excessive humanity has unleashed on it. My misanthropy comes from a negation of the psychotic humanism that has so flooded our movement (since its transition from cowboy hats to dreadlocks) with woo bullshit elevating human beings to something more than animal, something more than part of the natural world.

I am a misanthrope because I believe that wolves and tree voles and *Darlingtonia* have as much right to life and liberty as any gun toting redneck, crystal-worshipping

dervisher or angry Indian with a ski mask. I am a misanthrope because I hate the fact that my species invented strip mines, clearcuts, fellerbunchers, sitcoms and oil spills. I am a misanthrope because in varying degrees, all of humanity is to blame for the current state of the planet. I am a misanthrope because I hate what the upper class gods of economics have done to my Earth, because I watched three children starve to death in Nicaragua after their parents were duped into having more children than they could support by the infallible Pope. I am a misanthrope not because I hate humans individually, but because I hate the culmination of humanity's imperialism on the natural world. I hate seeing the depravity of underprivileged humans in cities the world over. I hate war. I hate genocide and ethnic cleansing. I hate toxic water and barren hillsides. I am a misanthrope because I love humans as much as coyotes, kitty cats and Pileated woodpeckers and see that the only way for all of the aforementioned to live sustainably is to allow for a drastic decline in the population of the species *Homo sapiens*. I am a misanthrope because I love the Earth and all its inhabitants. I am a misanthrope because I love.

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The Ted K Archive

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Earth First! Journal Litha, June-July 1999, Pages 3 & 32. Appendix from Earth
First! Journal Lughnasadh, August-September 1999, Page 21.

<archive.org/details/earth_first_1999>

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