

Between Social Ecology and Deep Ecology: Gary Snyder's Ecological Philosophy

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2011

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Gary Snyder is not a philosopher, nor does he “consider himself particularly a ‘Beat.’”¹ Snyder is a poet, an essayist, an outdoorsman and a practitioner of Buddhism. But despite his reluctance to identify with the Beat title, he has been an undeniable influence on the Beat generation and its writers. He was fictionalized as the character Japhy Ryder in Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*², and helped initiate the San Francisco Renaissance by organizing poetry readings with his close friend Allen Ginsberg, among others, thus ushering in the Beats as a recognized social force. Although not technically a philosopher in the traditional or academic sense, his writings contain a very complex treatment of modern society’s relationship to the natural world. Snyder’s chief concerns are protecting nature from the ravages of civilization, putting humans back in touch with our “wild” selves and returning us to a sense of self-contemplation, community and embeddedness in nature.

Snyder puts his philosophical views into practice in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where he has made his home since 1970. Eschewing publicity, he sits *za zen* every day, and is a life-long proponent of ecological thinking. Snyder also draws from Mahayana Buddhism, bioregionalism and social anarchism in developing his perspective and philosophical orientation. Snyder most clearly spells out the beliefs he conveys through his poetry and practices in his essay work and interviews.

Because Snyder’s views are so nuanced, it’s possible for various schools of thought to adopt him as their own. Despite being claimed by proponents of deep ecology, and finding his place within this school of thought, Snyder’s background, his reading of Marx and anarchism, and his philosophical and political concerns align him also with social ecology, making him an appropriate bridge between these two polarized nature philosophies. The debates between social ecology and deep ecology characterized the emergent Green movement in the 1980s and 90s, and had a tremendous influence within the Earth First! movement. They reverberate today as we face an increasingly dire ecological future. Social ecology is primarily concerned with the dialectic between forms of domination in the human world, and how this leads to the domination of nature. It is a view that emphasizes that the solution to humans’ destruction of non-human nature is a social one. Deep ecology is more concerned with changing human consciousness, drawing from religious and philosophical perspectives. Snyder acknowledges both, emphasizing the need to change consciousness, while advocating for social changes to reharmonize human’s relationship to non-human nature.

¹ Jann Garitty, Assistant to Gary Snyder, e-mail message to author, October 29th, 2010.

² Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York City: The Viking Press, 1958).

Snyder's Early Life and Influences

*you bastards
my fathers
and grandfathers, stiff-necked
punchers, miners, dirt farmers, railroad-men
killd off the cougar and grizzly
nine bows. Your itch
in my boots too,
-your sea roving
tree hearted son*
from "Dusty Braces," *Turtle Island*³

Snyder's background is helpful in understanding his philosophical impulses. He spent most of his early years in rural Washington state, and then moved with his mother, following a divorce, to Portland, Oregon. Snyder first developed an appreciation for nature at a young age: "I found myself standing in an indefinable awe before the natural world. An attitude of gratitude, wonder, and a sense of protection especially as I began to see the hills being bulldozed down for roads, and the forests of the Pacific Northwest magically float away on logging trucks."⁴ Yet observing these realities, Snyder did not have the tools at hand to apprehend them. He explains that his parents were Wobblies, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), but he could find nothing in their politics to help him understand what was happening. For that he needed imagination and reading Marx and anarchist texts.⁵

Snyder's radical parentage, working class childhood, and early grounding in Marxism and anarchism come across quite clearly in his essays and interviews. As he points out, "One of the most interesting things that has ever happened in the world was the Western discovery that history is arbitrary and that societies are human, and not divine, or natural, creations — that we actually have the capacity of making choices in regard to our social systems."⁶

Snyder was also exposed to local native Coast Salish people at a young age. They influenced his views of how it was possible to exist in the world, resulting in a lifelong fascination with Native American beliefs and rituals. As we will see, it is Snyder's understanding of Native American views and customs that ultimately rounded out his reading of Marx. Snyder criticizes Marxists both for looking down upon so-called

³ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York City: New Directions Books, 1974), 75.

⁴ Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1977), 15.

⁵ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 16.

⁶ Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964–1979* (New York City: New Directions Books, 1980), 101.

primitive people, and for not sufficiently understanding the effects of capitalism upon nature and the destruction of wilderness.

Poets and Poetry

*As for poets
The Earth Poets
Who write small poems,
Need help from no man.*

from “As For Poets,” *Turtle Island*⁷

Snyder’s love of poetry began in his childhood. At the age of seven, Snyder was bedridden for weeks as a result of an accident. During this time his parents checked out books for him at the Seattle library, and from that he developed a voracious appetite for reading. By his early teens, Snyder was reading poetry, particularly that of Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters, and at the age of seventeen, D.H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman.

Although a prolific essayist, Snyder’s primary medium of expression became poetry. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Turtle Island* in 1974⁸, and went on to write sixteen books of poetry. For Snyder, the poet plays an essential role in society, laying the foundation for people’s self-understanding and connection to tradition and place. Snyder sees poets as transmitting the “complex of songs and chants” that “a whole People sees itself through.” In the West, he sees this role filled initially by “Homer and going through Virgil, Dante, Milton, Blake, Goethe, and Joyce. They were the workers who took on the ambitious chore of trying to absorb all the myth/history lore of their own past traditions, and put it into order as a new piece of writing and let it be a map or model of the world and mind for everyone to steer by.”⁹

For Snyder there are at least two levels of poetic expression. The first is that which seeks to show the “implicit potentials of the language,” making language work better and bring more “delight,” since language is primarily a means of communication. Thus, increasing the clarity, playfulness and interest in communication is one level of expression. But for Snyder, his primary focus is on another level, that in which “poetry is intimately linked to any culture’s fundamental worldview, body of lore, which is its myth base, its symbol base, and the source of much of its values — that myth-lore foundation that underlies any society.”¹⁰ Poetry, ideally, holds a society together by giving it shared meaning. Despite his reading of Marx, and his anarchism, Snyder does not see poetry as “the work of prophecy. Nor is it, ultimately, the work of social

⁷ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 87.

⁸ Snyder, *Turtle Island*

⁹ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 171.

¹⁰ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 70.

change.” While admitting that it can play this role in a minor capacity, poetry is really meant to bring “us back to our original, true natures from whatever habit-molds that our perceptions, that our thinking and feeling get formed into. And bringing us back to original true mind, seeing the universe freshly in eternity.”¹¹ This perspective echoes Snyder’s interest in Buddhism, particularly Zen of the Mahayana tradition. For Snyder, the gifted poets speak not for themselves, but for everyone: “And to express *all* of our selves you have to go beyond your own self. Like Dogen, the Zen master said, ‘we study the self to forget the self. And when you forget the self, you become one with all things.’ And that’s why poetry’s not self-expression in those small self terms.”¹² Snyder seeks to express the importance of nature, beyond the concerns of humans, even adopting wild nature’s standpoint, in his poetry.

While looking to poets to express the myth and lore that underlie any civilization, Snyder insists on staying in touch with the simple things, and not forgetting his roots. Snyder advises poets, and people generally, to “get back in touch ... with ordinary things: with your body, with the dirt, with the dust, with anything you like, you know — the streets. The streets or the farm, whatever it is.” He expresses what might be misinterpreted as a kind of anti-intellectualism, suggesting that we “get away from books and from the elite sense of being bearers of Western culture and all that crap. But also, ultimately, into your mind, into *original mind* before any books were put into it, or before any language was invented.”¹³ This kind of celebration of ‘ordinary folks’ and anti-elitism characterizes Snyder’s work. Here he also echoes Zen Buddhism, emphasizing the importance of self-understanding, of knowing one’s mind.¹⁴

Western philosophers from the Sophists on may differ with Snyder here, saying it is impossible to achieve such a state of mind. In an interview with Paul Geneson in 1976, for instance, Snyder was asked to respond to Jean Paul Sartre who, upon approaching a tree, thinks “‘I feel in an absurd position — I cannot break through my skin to get in touch with this bark, which is outside me,’ the Japanese poet would say what?” Snyder responds, “Sartre is confessing the sickness of the West. At least he’s honest.” He goes on to say that “The Oriental will say, ‘But there are ways to do it, my friend. It’s no big deal.’ It’s no big deal, especially if you get attuned to that possibility from an early life...to learn about the pine from the pine rather than from a botany textbook...They also know that you can look at the botany textbook and learn a few things too.”¹⁵ Here Snyder draws from his experience in nature. He spent much time hiking trails and breathing fresh air to counter an urban-based perspective which may not be able

¹¹ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 72.

¹² Snyder, *The Real Work*, 65 (emphasis in original). The concept of ‘original true mind’ (honshin in Japanese) is central to Zen.

¹³ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 64 and 65 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴ Snyder is obviously well read, and works in the medium of intellectual expression. His point here is that we should not take ourselves too seriously, and it is important to take a step back from reading and writing to better understand ourselves.

¹⁵ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 67.

to imagine embracing, let alone understanding, a tree. Because he is a poet, Snyder injects some levity and playfulness into the discussion. For Snyder, the poet plays the part of the Trickster, opening minds and considering fresh perspectives. Here he suggests, contrary to Sartre, that we really can understand the pine, that we can know the natural world beyond ourselves.

Of course Plato exiles all the poets from his Republic, thinking that they lie too much. Plato would probably have little patience for Snyder. But as Snyder points out, Plato's "*The Republic*, is a great myth, a totalitarian vision that nobody took seriously until the twentieth century. The ideas were disastrous, whether they came through Hitler or Stalin." In contrast to this, Snyder says that poets "stay with the simple old myths that are clearly just plain stories, and don't presume (as a rule) to try and formulate public policy. Poets' lies are easily seen through and not dangerous because they promise so little. Plato's Big Lie is sinister because it promises control and power to the leaders."¹⁶ Snyder is suspicious of leaders, and of the State. Although Snyder accuses Plato of providing a justification for the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, he also writes that "the Tragedians asked Plato to let them put on some tragedies. Plato said, 'Very interesting, gentlemen, but I must tell you something. We have prepared here the greatest tragedy of all. It is called The State.'¹⁷ Snyder categorizes the State as being part of what he calls "biosphere culture," the global organization of the planet along totalitarian lines. Snyder sees that biosphere culture began with "early civilization and the centralized state; (they) are cultures that spread their economic support system out far enough that they can afford to wreck one ecosystem, and keep moving on. ... It leads us to imperialist civilization with capitalism and institutionalized economic growth."¹⁸

Snyder's Mahayana Buddhism

*Out there somewhere
a shrine for the old ones,
the dust of the old bones,
old songs and tales.*

*What we ate — who ate what —
how we all prevailed.*

from "Old Bones,"
*Mountains and Rivers Without End*¹⁹

¹⁶ Gary Snyder, *Back on the Fire* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2007), 44.

¹⁷ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 15.

¹⁸ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 21.

¹⁹ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996), 10.

As should be clear from Snyder's views on the role of poets and poetry in society, one of the biggest influences on his work is the philosophy of Buddhism. Like Alan Watts, Snyder has done a great deal to popularize Buddhism in the West, both by explicitly talking about it, and by presenting a Buddhist perspective in his poetry. Snyder first read Ezra Pound's and Arthur Waley's translations of Confucius, the *Tao Te Ching*, and Chinese poetry. He read the *Upanishads*, *Vedas*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and other Chinese and Indian Buddhist classics. He explains "the convergence that I found really exciting was the Mahayana Buddhist wisdom-oriented line as it developed in China and assimilated the older Taoist tradition... Then I learned that this tradition is still alive and well in Japan. That convinced me that I should go and study in Japan."²⁰ In a certain sense, Snyder is right to reject a Beat identity. He spent six years in Japan when the Beats were making a name for themselves in the US, and he was not a part of the original New York circle. Through much of the mid-fifties until the late 60s, when the Beats were in their heyday, Snyder was shuttling back and forth between California and Japan as a practicing Buddhist.

Deep ecologists, such as George Sessions and Bill Devall, authors of *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, draw a great deal from this tradition as well. In a chapter entitled "Some Sources of the Deep Ecological Perspective," Sessions and Devall state "contemporary deep ecologists have found inspiration in the Taoist classic, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the writings of the thirteenth-century Buddhist teacher, Dogen." For these authors: "Eastern traditions express organic unity, address what we have called the minority tradition, and express acceptance of biocentric equality in some traditions."²¹ Sessions and Devall dedicate their book to Snyder, and state "among contemporary writers, no one has done more than Gary Snyder to shape the sensibilities of the deep ecology movement."²² So what is the significance of Buddhism to Snyder, and to deep ecologists?

The Buddhist teachings, or Dharma, are separated into three schools, associated with the spread of Buddhism to different countries. These three schools are often referred to as 'Turnings of the Wheel.' The early Buddhist school of thought is the Hinayana, originating in India. It puts emphasis upon individual enlightenment or an end to personal suffering through the achievement of nirvana. As C.W. Huntington, Jr. points out, "release from fear and suffering can be achieved only by learning to see completely through this illusory appearance of a self, and beyond even death, to the underlying collocation of perceptual and conceptual data responsible for the illusion. This is defined as 'wisdom.'"²³

²⁰ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 94 and 95.

²¹ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Book, 1985), 100.

²² Devall and Sessions, 83.

²³ C.W. Huntington, Jr. *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 87.

The second ‘Turning of the Wheel’ is the Mahayana, which developed in Japan as Zen, and in China as Chan. The Mahayana represents an internal self-critique of the Buddhist tradition. Practitioners of the Mahayana believed that the Hinayana emphasis upon wisdom, or insight into the nature of suffering, was insufficient, and elevated compassion to the same level as wisdom. Concurrent with this development was the introduction of the Bodhisattva ideal, in which Buddhist practitioners were instructed to postpone individual enlightenment until all can be freed of suffering. Thus compassion for the suffering of others became of prominent importance. The third and final ‘Turning of the Wheel’ occurred with the development of Buddhism in Tibet, ushering in the Vajrayana, which saw the mixing of indigenous Tibetan religious beliefs with Buddhism, and an emphasis upon visualization techniques and rituals. About the Vajrayana, Snyder says of “all the sophisticated and learned religious traditions in the world today, (Vajrayana) seems to be the only one that has traditional continuous links that go back to the Stone Age...These are the religious insights and practices that belonged to the Paleolithic hunters at the beginning. This is the real nature mysticism.”²⁴

Of the three ‘Turnings of the Wheel,’ Snyder, while appreciative of the Vajrayana, is most immersed in the Mahayana. Despite his fascination with ‘primitive’ cultures and shamanism, Snyder says, “There is nothing in primitive cultures that is at all equivalent to Mahayana philosophy or logic. There is a science and true sophistication of certain states of mind and power that can come through shamanism but the shaman himself doesn’t understand the power. Buddhism and yoga have been gradually evolving as a true science of the mind and science of the nature of things but of a different order from the physical sciences we’ve had so far.”²⁵

After spending the better part of six years in a Japanese Zen monastery, Snyder returned to the US. Since then, he has attempted to bring his meditation practice into everyday life. For Snyder, what we need to do “is to take the great intellectual achievement of the Mahayana Buddhists and bring it back to a community style of life which is not necessarily monastic.”²⁶ For Snyder, Zen is “a way of using your mind and practicing your life and doing it with other people. It has a style that involves others. It brings a particular kind of focus and attention to work. It values work...At the same time it has no external law for doing it. So you must go very deep into yourself to find the foundation of it. In other words it turns you inward rather than giving you a rulebook to live by. Zen is practice that is concerned with *liberation*, not with giving people some easy certainty.”²⁷

Thus for Snyder, the ‘real work’ is to achieve liberation for all sentient beings, working alongside others to make the world a better place: “The poet is right there ... in the area that says ‘Let the shit fly,’ which is different from the religious person in civ-

²⁴ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 176.

²⁵ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 15.

²⁶ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 16.

²⁷ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 153.

alized times, who is operating in the realm of control, self-discipline, purity, training, self-knowledge.”²⁸ This position may reflect Snyder’s decision to leave the Japanese monastery, and rejoin the world, with all its troubles and difficulties. It also represents an attempt to live up to the Bodhisattva ideal, to work alongside others to help everyone end suffering together. As Snyder notes, “the mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void.”²⁹

Buddhists have an expansive concept of the self. It is an anti-essentialist philosophy, rejecting both the idea of a ‘soul’ and of God. A central principle in Mahayana is that of ‘emptiness,’ which is a dialectical concept. Emptiness, or *Sunyata*, posits that nothing has an essential nature, and can only be understood only in relationship to its context. As Huntington explains, “As components of worldly experience all elements of conceptualization and perception come into being through an unstable conjunction of the requisite circumstances, and cease to be through disjunction of these same circumstances: Their intrinsic nature is like a bundle of hollow reeds.”³⁰

This insight leads Snyder to quote Dogen, in saying, “in his funny cryptic way ... ‘whoever told people that ‘Mind’ means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses.’”³¹ Buddhism allows Snyder to see human mind in nature, and nature in the human mind. And it provides an alternative philosophical framework for deep ecologists disillusioned with the West.

Deep Ecology

*The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.*

*In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.*

²⁸ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 177.

²⁹ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1969), 92.

³⁰ Huntington Jr., p. 91

³¹ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Fransisco: North Point Press, 1990), 20.

*To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:*

*stay together
learn the flowers
go light*

“For the Children,” *Turtle Island*³²

Arne Naess coined the term deep ecology in his 1973 article, ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements.’³³ According to Sessions and Devall, “Naess was attempting to describe the deeper, more spiritual approach to Nature exemplified in the writings of Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. He thought that this deeper approach resulted from a more sensitive openness to ourselves and nonhuman life around us. The essence of deep ecology is to keep asking more searching questions about human life, society, and nature as in the Western philosophical tradition of Socrates.”³⁴ Deep ecology had a major influence on the Earth First! Movement in the 1980s and 90s, and today has helped shape the perspectives of Primitivists and anti-civilization advocates.³⁵ Deep ecology, in addition to drawing from Buddhism, Taoism, and Native American traditions, also draws from Western philosophy, what it calls the ‘minority tradition.’ This includes the anarchists Peter Kropotkin and Murray Bookchin and “such diverse individuals as Thomas Jefferson, Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie and Carl Sandburg, as well as Paul Goodman, and in the novels of Ursula LaGuin,” among others.³⁶

The Western philosopher that most impresses Sessions is Spinoza. For Sessions, “Spinoza’s metaphysics is a conceptualization of the idea of unity; there can be only one Substance or non-dualism which is infinite, and this Substance is also God or Nature. What we experience as the mental and the physical have no separate metaphysical reality, but rather are aspects or attributes of this one Substance. Individual things, such as Mt. Everest, humans, trees, and chipmunks, are temporary expressions of the continual flux of God/Nature/Substance.”³⁷ For Sessions, Spinoza’s position here echoes the insights of Buddhism. Sessions points to the Norwegian philosopher Jon Wetlesen’s “meticulous comparison of Spinozism and the ways of enlightenment of Mahayana Buddhism” to support his claims.³⁸

³² Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 86.

³³ Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements.” *Inquiry*, 16 (1973).

³⁴ Devall and Sessions, 65.

³⁵ Jason McQuinn, “Why I am not a Primitivist,” www.insurgentdesire.org.uk

³⁶ Devall and Sessions, 18. While pointing to this list of sometimes contradictory authors as a source of inspiration, Devall and Sessions do not really integrate their thoughts into a coherent philosophy.

³⁷ Devall and Sessions, 238.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Deep ecology developed as a critique within the environmental movement confronting what were seen as the reformist shortcomings of mainstream environmental activists. Mainstream environmental organizations are criticized by deep ecologists for sharing an industrial paradigm with polluters. Snyder says the debate “within environmental circles is between those who operate from a human-centered resource management mentality and those whose values reflect an awareness of the integrity of the whole of nature. The latter position, that of Deep Ecology, is politically livelier, more courageous, more convivial, riskier, and more scientific.”³⁹ For Sessions and Devall, “deep ecology goes beyond a limited piecemeal shallow approach to environmental problems and attempts to articulate a comprehensive religious and philosophical worldview.” They site the Australian philosopher, Warwick Fox, who “expressed the central intuition of deep ecology: ‘It is the idea that we can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence: That there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms...to the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness.’”⁴⁰ It is this lack of differentiation between the human and the non-human, between humans and nature, which is one of social ecologists many problems with deep ecology.

Social Ecology vs. Deep Ecology

*Fifteen years passed. In the eighties
 With my lover I went where the roads end.
 Walked the hills for a day,
 looked out where it all drops away,
 discovered a path
 of carved stone inscriptions tucked into the sagebrush
 “Stomp out greed”
 “The best things in life are not things”
 words placed by an old sage.*

from “Finding the Space in the Heart,”
*Mountains and Rivers without End*⁴¹

Social ecology’s fundamental premise is that the ecological crisis is rooted in the social crisis, and that social hierarchies lead to the attempt to dominate nature. Therefore, according to Bookchin, in order to solve the ecological crisis, we must resolve the

³⁹ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 181.

⁴⁰ Devall and Sessions, 66, quoting Warwick Fox, “Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time?” *The Ecologist*, V. 14, 5–6, 1984. Devall and Sessions both deny an ontological division between the human and the non-human and, at the same time, posit nature as distinct from the human realm, as being ‘out there.’

⁴¹ Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers without End*, 150.

social crisis, which leads some humans to dominate others. Thus the ecological crisis is rooted in a class-based, hierarchical, patriarchal society.

The failure to make a distinction between human and non-human nature, and the general tendency to emphasize ‘oneness’ is a chief concern of social ecologists in their debates with deep ecologists. As Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin argue, “Deep ecology...views first nature, in the abstract, as a ‘cosmic oneness,’ which bears striking similarities to otherworldly concepts common to Asian religions. In concrete terms, it views first nature as ‘wilderness,’ a concept that by definition means nature essentially separated from human beings and hence ‘wild.’ Both notions are notable for their static and anticivilizational character.” Biehl and Bookchin continue, arguing, “Deep ecologists emphasize an ungraded, nonevolutionary continuity between human and nonhuman nature, to the point of outright denial of a boundary between adaptive animality and innovative humanity.”⁴²

Murray Bookchin was undoubtedly deep ecology’s leading critic in the 1980s, when this nature philosophy was gaining traction within the emergent Green movement. In 1987, at the first national gathering of the Greens, Bookchin launched his first polemic, entitled “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement.” Bookchin was addressing the new movement which was “looking for an ecological approach, one that is rooted in an ecological philosophy, ethics, sensibility, and image of nature, and ultimately for an ecological movement that will transform our domineering market society into a nonhierarchical cooperative society — a society that will live in harmony with nature because its members live in harmony with one another.”⁴³ Bookchin proposes social ecology, a view he began to develop in the early 1960s.⁴⁴

Bookchin viewed the differences between social and deep ecology as being of the utmost importance, saying that they “consist not only of quarrels with regard to theory, sensibility, and ethics. They have far-reaching practical and political consequences. They concern not only the way we view nature, or humanity; or even ecology, but how we propose to change society and by what means.”⁴⁵ Bookchin brings a Left perspective, and a social orientation to ecological issues.

Rather than taking on deep ecology through an imminent critique in which he would explore deep ecology from the inside out, drawing out its implications to show its limitations, Bookchin chose a polemical approach, taking deep ecology head on, in a polarizing fashion. Bookchin’s approach presented two starkly different nature philosophies, one (his) leading to human liberation and reconciliation with nature,

⁴² Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin, “Theses on Social Ecology and Deep Ecology,” *Left Green Perspectives*, No. 33 (October 1995), 1.

⁴³ Murray Bookchin, “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, Nos. 4–5 (Summer, 1987).

⁴⁴ Murray Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962 and “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought,” *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971).

⁴⁵ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology,” 3.

and the other (deep) leading to a wishy-washy kind of liberal reformism at best, and eco-fascism at worst.⁴⁶ This style of debate led Snyder to say that Bookchin “writes like a Stalinist thug.”⁴⁷ Yet Bookchin raised many essential issues confronting deep ecology. For instance he criticized Edward Abbey, a revered figure to members of Earth First!, for the racism of his views on non-European immigrants, however couched in ecological terms they were; he denounced a writer in the *Earth First!* journal who, using the pseudonym ‘Miss Ann Thropy’ welcomed the AIDS virus as a necessary population control (along with “war, famine, humiliating poverty”); and he took on Dave Foreman, at the time an Earth First! spokesman and de facto leader, who said in an interview that, “the worst thing we could do in Ethiopia is to give aid — the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve.”⁴⁸ However polarizing Bookchin’s debate style was, he raised essential problems with many positions taken by deep ecologists. The lack of a social analysis, informed by the values of the left, lead many prominent proponents of deep ecology to embrace profoundly racist political positions. While Snyder did not support these views, nor did he publicly condemn them, largely staying out of the fight.

One of Bookchin’s central philosophical problems with deep ecology is both its tendency not to make distinctions within human society, to blame ‘humanity’ in general rather than specific human rulers for instance, but also its ahistoricism:

“Deep ecology contains no history of the emergence of society out of nature, a crucial development that brings social theory into organic contact with ecological theory. It presents no explanation of — indeed, it reveals no interest in — the emergence of hierarchy out of society...in short, the highly graded social as well as ideological development that gets to the roots of the ecological problem in the social domination of women by men and of men by other men, ultimately giving rise to the notion of dominating nature in the first place.”⁴⁹

This observation leads Bookchin to accuse deep ecology as viewing nature as being what one sees looking through a ‘picture window.’ He argues that deep ecologists maintain a strong distinction between humans and nature, between the city and “the wild.”

Political theorist Tim Luke engages in a more sympathetic, imminent critique than does Bookchin. Yet he arrives at many of the same conclusions concerning deep ecology’s flaws. Luke writes, “Nature in deep ecology simply becomes a new transcendent identical subject-object to redeem humanity. By projecting selfhood into Nature, humans are to be saved by finding their self-maturation and spiritual growth in it...Nature,

⁴⁶ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology,” 5.

⁴⁷ Bob Sipchen, “Ecology’s Family Feud: Murray Bookchin Turns up the Volume on a Noisy Debate,” Los Angeles Times, March 27, 1989, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman, *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*, (Boston: South End Press, 1999), 123 -124. The author writing under the pseudonym Miss Ann Thropy is reported to be Christopher Manes.

⁴⁹ Bookchin and Foreman, 9.

then, becomes ecosophical humanity's alienated self-understanding, partly reflected back to itself and selectively perceived as self-realization, rediscovered in biospheric processes."⁵⁰ But what of Snyder, the appointed poet laureate of deep ecology? Does he share the views of other deep ecologists such as Sessions and Devall?

Nature/The Wild/Wilderness

*We look to the future with pleasure
we need no fossil fuel
get power within
grow strong on less.*

from "Tomorrow's Song," *Turtle Island*⁵¹

In contrast to other proponents of deep ecology, in which nature is a static concept, outside of human culture, Snyder's views are far more nuanced. When speaking of nature, Snyder proposes three categories: nature, the wild, and wilderness. Bookchin and Snyder would be in agreement in defining nature. Bookchin, drawing from Hegel, sees human culture as a second nature, as nature rendered self-conscious.⁵² Thus both humans and the non-human are an expression of nature. Similarly for Snyder, nature is "the physical universe and all its properties."⁵³ The second category is the wild, which is the organic process and essence of nature. The wild is the ongoing process of the evolution of nature. Finally wilderness is that aspect of nature which exists outside of the human world. Wilderness "is simply topos — its areas where the process is dominant."⁵⁴

Human society is an expression of nature; it is natural; "we can say that New York City and Tokyo are 'natural' but not 'wild.'"⁵⁵ So there is nothing unnatural about New York City, "or toxic wastes, or atomic energy, and nothing — by definition — that we do or experience in life is 'unnatural.'"⁵⁶ Thus, for Snyder, "civilization is part of nature...our body is a vertebrate mammal being."⁵⁷ In contrast to civilization, wilderness "is a part of the physical world that is largely free of human agency. Wild nature is most endangered by human greed or carelessness. 'Wild' is a valuable word. It refers to the process or condition of nature on its own, without human intervention.

⁵⁰ Tim Luke, "The Dreams of Deep Ecology," *Telos*, No. 76 (Summer 1988), 81.

⁵¹ Snyder, *Turtle Island*, 77.

⁵² Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, (New York: Black Rose Books, 1990).

⁵³ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 9

⁵⁴ Paul Ebenkamp, ed., *The Etiquette of Freedom: Gary Snyder, Jim Harrison, and The Practice of the Wild*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 73.

⁵⁵ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 11.

⁵⁶ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 8.

⁵⁷ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 181 — 182.

It is a process, a condition, not a place. ‘The wilds’ is a place where wild process dominates.”⁵⁸

We thus have nature, which includes human culture, and the wilderness, which is outside of human society. And we have the wild, which is a complex process of becoming. For Snyder, “‘ecology’ is a valuable shorthand term for complexity in motion.”⁵⁹ Humans can become more wild by getting in touch with non-human nature. By spending time in the wilderness, discovering aspects of themselves outside of human culture, humans can reconnect with their biological selves, better understanding their place in the world.

Snyder’s view of nature is neither romantic nor one-dimensional. Having spent a great deal of time hiking trails, and working as a fire lookout for months at a time deep in the wilderness, Snyder has developed a healthy appreciation for the complexity of the natural world: “Life in the world is not just eating berries in the sunlight. I like to imagine a depth ecology that would go to the dark side of nature, the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite.” Hence, for Snyder, in addition to being beautiful, fecund, and alive, wild nature is “also nocturnal, anaerobic, cannibalistic, microscopic, digestive, fermentative, cooking away in the warm dark.”⁶⁰

Snyder’s multi-dimensional definition of nature, and his three categories, brings an interesting perspective to discussion of the ecological crisis, in which toxic waste, industrial pollution, and the continuing emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere threaten human life. In this context, Snyder points out that “nature is ultimately in no way endangered; wilderness is.”⁶¹

The War Against the Wild

*And when humanity is laid out like coal
somewhere some earnest geologist
will note them in his notebook.*

from “The Politicians,” *The Back Country*⁶²

Snyder’s insights concerning wilderness and human society’s destruction of it come at a critical time in human evolution. Since the industrial revolution the capitalist mode of production has been polluting the air, land and water at an alarming rate. The problems of deforestation, water and air pollution and chemicals in the food supply may only be overshadowed by the effects of catastrophic climate change. The

⁵⁸ Snyder, *Back on the Fire*, 25, 26.

⁵⁹ Snyder, *Back on the Fire*, 31.

⁶⁰ Ebenkamp, 77.

⁶¹ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 181.

⁶² Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (New York City: New Directions, 1968), 145.

increasing presence of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, in the atmosphere threaten to raise global temperatures by as much as 9 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of this century if business as usual continues. At this date, rather than reducing emissions, capitalism is in fact increasing them. This will truly be disastrous for humanity, affecting the southern hemisphere more than the northern, but wrecking civilizations across the globe.⁶³ Snyder speaks to the starkness of the situation: “What we are witnessing in the world today is an unparalleled waterfall of destruction of a diversity of human cultures; plant species; animal species, of the richness of the biosphere and the millions of years of organic evolution that have gone into it.”⁶⁴

Like social ecology, which links the domination of humans by humans with the attempt to dominate nature, Snyder draws a similar parallel: “A society that treats its natural surroundings in a harsh and exploitative way will do the same to ‘other’ people. Nature and human ethics are not unconnected. The growing expansion of ecological consciousness translates into a deeper understanding of interconnectedness in both nature and history, and we have developed a far more sophisticated grasp of cause and effect relationships.”⁶⁵

Bookchin implores the ecological movement to examine the nature of hierarchy in society, and to explore dominant power relations in order to understand the root causes of ecological destruction. He is quick to point out that it is not science or technology per se that is the problem. Snyder concurs, calling these things “straw men,” and asks the question, “Who is being served by them?” He answers, “A small number of owners who have centralized it, production, the banks, and even the government so to speak.” Like Bookchin’s advocacy of a libertarian technology, one that serves human needs in harmony with nature, Snyder asks if it is possible to have a “technology that is bioregionally appropriate and serves the needs of the people at the same time?” Snyder offers the opinion that a libertarian technology “would have developed considerably longer ago if it had not been to the disadvantage of centralized economies to explore solar technologies...A decentralized energy technology could set us free. It’s only the prevailing economic and government policies that block us from exploring that further. There is a people’s technology.”⁶⁶ A ‘peoples’ technology’ would serve human needs, rather than corporate profit. For Snyder, the centralization of power is a central problem. The decentralization of energy production would shift power back to the people from the hands of corporations. A ‘people’s technology’ would also work with, rather than against, the processes of the natural world.

⁶³ “Contributions of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 2007. www.ipcc.ch and Javier Sethness, “Atmospheric Dialectics: A Critical Theory of Climate Change,” *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, Vol. 12., No. 2 (Fall, 2010).

⁶⁴ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 17.

⁶⁵ Snyder, *Back on the Fire*, 23.

⁶⁶ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 147.

In contrast to many advocates of deep ecology who, as Luke points out, mostly want to preserve nature for field trips, with deep ecology “a philosophy for properly outfitted mountain climbers, backpackers, and field biologists,”⁶⁷ advocates of environmental justice, those who advance the interests of the poor, would find an ally in Snyder. According to Snyder:

“environmental concerns and politics have spread worldwide. In some countries the focus is almost entirely on human health and welfare issues. It is proper that the range of the movement should run from wildlife to urban health. But there can be no health for humans and cities that bypasses the rest of nature. A properly radical environmental position is in no way anti-human. We grasp the pain of the human condition in its full complexity, and add the awareness of how desperately endangered certain key species and habitats have become.”⁶⁸

Thus the attempt to separate the concerns of the city from those of the wild must be fought. As Snyder points out, “it’s all one front ultimately. It only serves the interests of the industrial capitalist cancer to have people think it’s two fronts, that environment is white people’s concern and jobs poor people’s and black people’s concern...The natural world, as anyone should see, is being ripped off, exploited, and oppressed just as our brothers and sisters in the human realm are being exploited and oppressed.”⁶⁹ Thus Snyder joins social concerns with the effort to stop the destruction of the natural world.

Bioregionalism and Reinhabitation

*September heat.
The Watershed Institute meets,
planning more work with the B.L.M.
And we have visitors from China, Forestry guys,
who want to see how us locals are doing with our plan.
Editorials in the paper are against us,
a botanist is looking at rare plants in the marsh.*

from “What to Tell, Still,” *danger on peaks*⁷⁰

As we have seen, Snyder is a critic of the State. But what would he propose to replace this mode of social organization? For Snyder, and the larger bioregional movement in general, the answer is obvious: the bioregion. A bioregion is an area defined by its natural boundaries, and is “posited on the idea that the human community is only one of the communities on any given part of the planet, and that the other communities — plant life, animal life, mineral life — inside the landscape with its watershed divisions,

⁶⁷ Luke, 86.

⁶⁸ Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 181.

⁶⁹ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 144,145.

⁷⁰ Gary Snyder, *danger on peaks* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker Hoard, 2004), 41.

its soil types, its annual rainfall, its temperature extremes, all of that constitutes a biome, an ecosystem, or, as they like to say, a natural nation.”⁷¹ In getting to know one’s bioregion, one can better understand the natural context within which we live. We can learn where our water comes from, where our waste goes, and how best to live within our surroundings. For Snyder, “the ethics or morality of this is far more subtle than merely being nice to squirrels.”⁷² This is a huge undertaking, and is the task that awaits us: “We haven’t discovered North America yet. People live on it without knowing what it is or where they are. They live on it literally like invaders. You know whether or not a person knows where he is by whether or not he knows the plants. By whether or not he knows what the soils and waters do.”⁷³ In contrast to being stewards of the land, understanding where we really are, in Americans, Snyder sees “a nation of fossil fuel junkies, very sweet people and the best hearts in the world. But nonetheless fossil fuel junkies of tremendous mobility zapping back and forth, who are still caught on the myth of the frontier, the myth of boundless resources and a vision of perpetual materialistic growth.”⁷⁴ Reorganizing society along bioregional lines alone is not enough. We would also need to incorporate social ecology’s emphasis on confronting human forms of domination, such as racism, sexism, and hetero-patriarchy, for this to really approximate a liberatory alternative to the State. History is littered with examples of cultures which were bioregionally defined, but which maintained internal hierarchies and forms of domination.

Many so called Primitivists such as John Zerzan advocate for a return to hunter-gatherer societies to solve the problems of civilization and reconcile humans’ relationship with nature. Snyder advocates for learning from primitive cultures. Quoting the economic anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, he says that “the upper Paleolithic was the original affluent society, and (Sahlins) estimates that they worked an average of 15 hours a week...There is no class of landless paupers in primitive culture. Landless paupers belong to civilization.”⁷⁵ In an echo of the myth of the fall from grace, Snyder sites the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who “says that civilization has been in a long decline since the Neolithic,”⁷⁶ but he believes that “we cannot again have seamless primitive cultures, or the purity of the archaic, (but) we can have neighborhood and community.”⁷⁷ In response to criticisms, and in contrast to other advocates of Primitivism, Snyder says, “It isn’t really a main thrust in my argument or anyone else’s I know that we should go backward.”⁷⁸ But how do we move forward?

⁷¹ Ebenkamp, 42.

⁷² Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 63.

⁷³ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 69.

⁷⁴ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 9.

⁷⁵ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 34.

⁷⁶ Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 61.

⁷⁷ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 161.

⁷⁸ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 111.

Ecologizing the Dialectic

Chairman Mao, you should quit smoking.

Dont bother those philosophers

Build dams, plant trees,

dont kill flies by hand.

Marx was another westerner.

It's all in the head.

You dont need the bomb.

stick to farming.

Write some poems. Swim the river.

those blue overalls are great.

Dont shoot me, let's go drinking.

just

Wait.

from "To The Chinese Comrades,"

*The Back Country*⁷⁹

For Snyder, the bringing together of social and ecological concerns is the best way to address the ecological crisis: to understand the roots of the destruction of wilderness in the hierarchies inherent in capitalist, patriarchal culture. For Snyder this means "supporting any cultural and economic revolution that moves clearly toward a free, international, classless world."⁸⁰ Marxists, and leftists generally, understand the divisions within human society, but often fail when addressing ecological issues. For Snyder, this is because they "have been unable to bring themselves to think of the natural world as part of the dialectic of exploitation; they have been human-centered — drawing the line at exploitation of the working class." Snyder believes that his "small contribution to radical dialectic is to extend it to animals, plants: indeed, to the whole of life."⁸¹ In addition to not understanding the import of ecological issues, and of the necessity of developing an ecological consciousness, Marxists have also fallen short in their appreciation for so called primitive peoples. For Snyder, "Marxists, granted the precision of their critique on most points, often have a hard time thinking clearly about primitive cultures, and the usual tendency is to assume that they should become civilized."⁸² Rather than primitive peoples becoming civilized, Snyder advocates that civilized people learn from the wisdom of the "non-civilized."

Snyder says that when he first went to college, he felt a contradiction being a member of a society that was destroying "its own ground." This led him to a lengthy political analysis, and "the discovery of Marxist thought." While recognizing that capitalism is

⁷⁹ Snyder, *The Back Country*, 114.

⁸⁰ Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, 92.

⁸¹ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 130.

⁸² Snyder, *The Old Ways*, 25.

a large part of the problem of the destruction of non-human nature, believing as he does that “pollution is somebody’s profit,”⁸³ Snyder thinks there is more to it than that: “For a long time I thought it was only capitalism that went wrong. Then I got into American Indian studies and at school majored predominantly in anthropology and got close to some American Indian elders. I began to perceive that maybe it was all of Western culture that was off the track and not just capitalism — that there were certain self-destructive tendencies in our cultural tradition.” This led him to study the traditions of Native Americans, to Japan to study Buddhism, and ultimately to go ‘back to the land,’ reinhabiting the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.⁸⁴ It also led him to a lifetime of critiquing contemporary society, advocating the development of an ecological consciousness, and to try and change society. Since human activity can in fact change social relations, we have a responsibility to act. Even the most seemingly innocent activity can make a difference: “Without knowing it, little old ladies in tennis shoes who work to save whooping cranes are enemies of the state.”⁸⁵

In contrast to Western critics of Buddhism and Asian philosophies in general, including Bookchin, who say that these worldviews lead to a passive acceptance of the way things are and a kind of quietism, Snyder posits that “to act responsibly in the world doesn’t mean that you always stand back and let things happen: you play an active part, which means making choices, running risks, and karmically dirtying you hands to some extent. That’s what the Bodhisattva ideal is all about.”⁸⁶

Part of getting his ‘hands dirty’ has involved being on the California Arts Council, shaping policy for the arts in California, and doing local ecological organizing, including the unglamorous work of arguing in city council meetings: “I’ve spent years arguing the dialectic, but it’s another thing to go to supervisors’ meetings and deal with the establishment, to be right in the middle of whatever is happening right here, rather than waiting for a theoretical alternative government to come along.”⁸⁷

All this is in sharp contrast to Luke’s criticism of deep ecology as being “in the last analysis (a form of) ‘utopian ecologism.’ As a utopia, it presents alluring moral visions of what might be; at the same time, it fails to outline practicable means for realizing these ecologically moral visions.”⁸⁸ While this may be true for the deep ecology of Sessions and Devall, who advocate an incoherent ensemble of consciousness change, reformism, and “direct action” to reconcile our relation to the rest of nature, Snyder is quite explicit about the need to replace capitalism as an economic system, the State as a form of social organization, and to reintegrate humans into their natural environment. He advocates developing a new sense of human community, extending the notion of community to the non-human, and reinhabiting the land along bioregional

⁸³ Snyder, *A Place in Space* 36.

⁸⁴ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 94.

⁸⁵ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 160.

⁸⁶ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 107.

⁸⁷ Snyder, *The Real Work*, 117.

⁸⁸ Luke, 90.

lines. As Snyder states:

“Whatever sense of ethical responsibility and concern that human beings can muster must be translated from a human-centered consciousness to a natural-systems-wide sense of value. First, simply because such a bighearted sense of the world seems right, but also to help avert the potential destruction of even the very processes that sustain most life on earth...Such an extension of human intellect and sympathy into the nonhuman realms is a charming and mind-bending undertaking. It is also an essential step if we are to have a future worth living. It was hinted at in our ancient past, and could, if accomplished, be the culminating human moral and aesthetic achievement.”⁸⁹

The danger, as Luke points out, is that “to evoke such religious outlooks in post-industrial America, on one level, may promote maturity and forsaking consumerist illusions.” But on another level, it can provide “an ineffectual opiate for the masses as their current material standard of living disappears in deep ecological reforms.”⁹⁰ To counter this danger, we need a revolutionary movement with a social consciousness, a clear understanding of what we are up against, and the will to radically restructure and transform society from the ground up. Snyder advocates utilizing “civil disobedience, outspoken criticism, protest, pacifism, voluntary poverty, and even gentle violence if it comes to a matter of restraining some impetuous redneck,”⁹¹ to bring about a new society. As Snyder’s life and philosophy point out, drawing as it does from Zen, bioregionalism, and social anarchism, nothing short of this will solve the deep ecological crisis we find ourselves in. Exemplifying the best of both social ecology, with its commitment to ending social domination to halt humanity’s destruction of wild nature, and deep ecology, drawing as it does from Asian philosophies such as Buddhism and Daoism, Native American traditions, and the examples of primary peoples, Snyder is positioned perfectly to help us achieve the seemingly impossible task of harmonizing our relationship with the rest of nature before it is too late.

⁸⁹ Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 210.

⁹⁰ Luke, 79.

⁹¹ Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, 92.

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Paul would like to thank his wife, Lara, his brother, Michael Glavin, Chuck Morse, Jon Keller, Joe Lowndes, and David Schlosberg for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this work.

This essay will appear in the book, The Philosophy of the Beats, on the University Press of Kentucky, in 2011.

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