

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Nature, Technology, and Society: Cultural Roots of the Current Environmental Crisis* by Victor Ferkiss

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thered when the autonomy of others is enhanced, and this internal relation among individuals provides each with a mutual interest in the general will. This mutual interest is distinct from all forms of self-interest, even that of altruism.

This does not mean that the Rousseauian-Marxist perspective is opposed to the liberal tradition on all points. Levine rightly insists that legal safeguards stressed by the liberal tradition to protect against the tyranny of the majority should be an essential feature of future socialist societies. So-called "liberal tolerance" is in general an important part of socialism and communism for just the reason J. S. Mill discussed: it furthers human flourishing. If a future socialist state is "intolerant" regarding the restoration of capitalism, liberal states are no less committed to preventing the imposition of intolerant orthodoxies.

There are a few points in the book one might question. Levine asserts that for Marx the mere deprivatization of the means of production is progressive in itself, whether or not it is accompanied by democratization. I am not sure that this reading can be textually supported. It is also unfortunate that Levine could not find space to discuss some of the less progressive aspects of Rousseau's thought. A reference to Susan Moller Okin's devastating critique of the way in which this great theorist of autonomy denied the autonomy of women would have been in order. All in all, however, this is a stellar work. Anyone remotely interested in the philosophical principles underlying communism, or the debate between Marxism and liberalism, will profit immensely from reading it.

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Nature, Technology, and Society: Cultural Roots of the Current Environmental Crisis, by Victor Ferkiss. New York: New York University Press, 1993. \$40.00. Pp. viii, 341.

Nature, Technology and Society is a book that promises much. Purporting to be a study of the cultural roots of today's global environmental crisis, it consists of three parts. The first deals with the history of ideas on nature and technology, beginning with Mesopotamian civilization and ending with

the conservation movement in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. The second part explores ideas on nature and technology that lie outside the mainstream Western tradition, with successive chapters on Marxism, Islam, Nazism, and “the Orient.” The third part deals with contemporary environmental perspectives in the West, including technology critics, ecofeminism, ecotheology, the Greens, and radical environmentalism.

Yet despite this initial promise *Nature, Technology and Society* delivers very little. Readers searching for historical discussions will not find them here, since this work is written as a history of ideas, abstracted from historical conditions. Indeed, one will search in vain for substantial discussions of the impact of specific technologies, even though technology is one of the main topics of the book. Thus the steam engine is referred to on two pages, the railroad on seven, the automobile on one, and biotechnology on two. This work is therefore a history of ideas and little more.

Still, even in these terms the book falls short. Ferkiss is a harsh critic of all environmental viewpoints that arise from sources outside of the mainstream liberal tradition. This can be seen most clearly in his treatments of Thoreau (representing the Romantic critique of bourgeois society) and Marx. For Ferkiss the common designation of Thoreau as an environmentalist is erroneous. “Thoreau has enjoyed a great modern reputation as a lover of nature and a patron of wilderness. This esteem is largely undeserved, though Thoreau was known for his aversion to what technology was doing to America” (75). Thoreau, we are told, “was not a lover of nature per se, but a pastoralist in a traditional American sense” (76). After quoting a couple of poetic passages from Thoreau in which he expressed his awe of nature, Ferkiss accuses Thoreau of “hypocrisy” and of being “terrified” by wilderness. “For modern-day Americans,” we are informed, Thoreau “has little to contribute in solving twentieth-century technological problems” (76). Yet, it was Thoreau who wrote in the opening chapter of *Walden*:

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is not that mankind be well and honestly clad, but unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched.

Ferkiss’ outright dismissal of Thoreau contrasts sharply with his willingness to take Theodore Roosevelt seriously as “America’s first real conservationist president” (89). Although Roosevelt’s racist views of “the winning of the West” – which meant primarily the conquest and annihilation

of the Indians – are mentioned by Ferkiss, none of this is seen as interfering with his reputation as an “ardent conservationist.”

Ferkiss reserves his harshest criticism for what he calls “Marxist ideology.” His chief accusation: “Basically Marxism assumes that the domination of nature by humans is as good as it is necessary” (184). No viewpoint, Ferkiss suggests, has been so contemptuous of the earth as Marxism, and he tries to trace this to Marx himself. “Marx,” he says, “was a complete believer in the subordination of physical nature to people and their purposes” (107). Yet Ferkiss interestingly enough is able to find little or no evidence to back up this contention. Although he offers us a number of quotes from Marx, none (with the possible exception of a vague reference to “the idiocy of rural life”) show Marx to be contemptuous of nature. In order to “prove” his point Ferkiss therefore resorts to a battery of statements by such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, Stanley Aronowitz and Murray Bookchin.

One quotation that Ferkiss repeats twice in the space of ten pages is a statement by Habermas that (quoting directly from Ferkiss) says “any ‘resurrection of nature’ that does not entail its complete domination by mankind ‘cannot be logically conceived’ within the system of Marxist materialism” (107–08). Ferkiss however carefully refrains from quoting the entire sentence or presenting it in its proper context. What Habermas actually said in his essay on “Marx’s Metacritique of Hegel” in *Knowledge and Human Interests* was this: “The resurrection of nature cannot be logically conceived within materialism, no matter how much the early Marx and the speculative minds in the Marxist tradition (Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Theodore W. Adorno) find themselves attracted by this heritage of mysticism.” Habermas’ point was that the idealist tradition saw nature as externalized mind and envisioned a mystical resurrection of nature as the reuniting of mind with itself. For Marx’s materialism however (as Habermas remarks at the end of the same paragraph), “No matter how far our power of technical control over nature is extended, nature retains a substantial core that does not reveal itself to us.” In Marx’s view, according to Habermas, the main hope for a “synthesis” of human beings with nature lies with the transformation of work. But there are limits to the synthesis that can be achieved. There is nothing in Habermas’ discussion of Marx’s argument that attributes to Marx the view that there must be a “complete domination [of nature] by mankind.” Quite the contrary! Ferkiss has simply inserted these words, radically distorting Habermas’ argument, in order to be able to claim, based on Habermas’ authority, that Marx was anti-nature.

The attempt to castigate Marxism and its philosophical antecedents such as Hegelian philosophy is in fact one of the few glues holding this amorphous book together. In the chapter on Nazism Hitler is presented

as arguing in “Hegelian fashion” that “man is God in the making” (132). In the chapter on the “Orient” we are told that “Mao represented the Promethean urge within Marxism personified. Despite the fact that the main current of Chinese thought . . . affirms nature as good, Mao struggled against it in various ways, almost desperately” (145). Ferkiss however offers no evidence for this contention, and one suspects he has none.

Similar problems arise with respect to other issues touched on in the book. After discussing the greater ecological sensitivity of Chinese thought (in comparison to the West) Ferkiss dismisses it all with the statement that, “Despite their theoretical respect for nature, the Chinese, like the Native Americans, mistreated nature *as much as the Westerners did*” (141, emphasis added). One would expect some evidence to back this up. Yet Ferkiss offers none — either with respect to the Native American–Western comparison or the Chinese–Western comparison. No consistent environmentalist would argue that American Indians never mistreated nature, but to say that they mistreated it “as much as Westerners did” is quite another matter.

At the same time as he attempts to cast a shadow of doubt on all forms of environmentalism outside of the mainstream Western tradition, Ferkiss argues quite revealingly that “a golf course saved from housing or industrial development is still open space” (222). He refers to “Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher” as a “spokesperson for various ecological causes” (210). He tells us that the Persian Gulf war “met with the approval of the international community” (218). He claims that “the new trade relations between the United States and Mexico involve commitments — however unrealistic — on the part of Mexico to mend its environmental ways” (218). And he informs us that, “despite the still unsolved problem of how safely to dispose of nuclear wastes, the nuclear power industry now claims to be polluting less than fossil fuels” — as if we should take this seriously (219).

It is no wonder then that the book lacks any meaningful response to the world’s environmental problems. Having derived no genuine inspiration from his analysis of the cultural roots of nature and technology the author can only ask his readers to place their faith in a vague reconciliation of “liberal political theory” with “a call for a revival of community” (225). Having rejected so much that came before as “utopian,” Ferkiss finds himself forced to resort to the ultimate form of utopianism: the idea that ecological problems can be resolved by creating a greater community and incorporating more benign technology within a liberal-capitalist context.

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