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The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology, the Deep Ecology of Postmodernism, and Grand Narratives

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Deep ecology as developed by Arne Naess and others has much in common with postmodernist philosophy, and postmodernists for the most part are sympathetic to radical environmentalism. This confluence suggests that deep ecology and postmodernism might have common roots and so could provide resources for one another, but also that problems of one could also be problems of the other. Noting the congruence of Heidegger’s philosophy (a major source of inspiration for postmodernists) with deep ecology, Michael Zimmerman has suggested that there are antimodernist elements within deep ecology which could have dangerous political consequences. He proposes a new synthesis of ideas from deep ecology, modernism, and postmodernism to obviate these antimodernist elements while preserving the virtues of each philosophical perspective. What is the relationship between deep ecology, modernism, and postmodernism? Are there dangerous political tendencies in deep ecology? And if so, has Zimmerman provided a synthesis that resolves all the problems in, and unites the best features of, deep ecology, modernism, and postmodernism?

The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology

Deep ecology is clearly a radical philosophy, but just how radical is obscured by the way it has been received. It has been taken to be a division within environmental philosophy, first in opposition to “shallow” ecology, and later in relation to social ecology and ecofeminism, rather than in opposition to the dominant culture. Although no one doubts this opposition, it is only when seen in relation to the dominant culture that the full measure of its radicality becomes evident.

The simplest and most revealing way to characterize the dominant culture is as the “culture of modernity.” Though this culture has a number of competing strands, these strands share common assumptions. Modernity has its origins in
the Reformation, the rise of capitalism and the corresponding dissolution of feudalism, and the philosophical, scientific, and political revolutions of the seventeenth century. It was elaborated through the Enlightenment philosophies and political revolutions of the eighteenth century, and gained further impetus with the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century. Throughout, it has been associated with the triumph of European civilization over all other civilizations and cultures.

The concept which unifies the different strands of modernity is that of "progress": progress in knowledge, in the rationality of beliefs and institutions, and in the ability to control nature and society. Progress is equated with the emancipation of humanity from drudgery, disease, irrational beliefs, political oppression, and, in its more radical forms, economic necessity. The modernist notion of "progress" originated with the secularization and reformulation of Christian eschatology and gained a cosmic dimension with theories of evolution. In the second half of the twentieth century the notion of progress was reformulated as "development," defined in opposition to "underdeveloped." All societies and cultures were seen and evaluated according to their state of development; that is, according to how closely they approximated "advanced" Western societies.

The culture of modernity has always had its problems and its critics. To begin with, it emerged through a series of ideological struggles both among its advocates and against supporters of the old theocratic feudal order. The Counter-Reformation inspired the revival of Thomist philosophy, the proponents of which have continued up to the present to criticize modernity. Later, the social fragmentation, violence, and impoverishment generated by modernity, particularly associated with imperialism and industrialization, stimulated major reformulations of the culture of modernity, engendering the revolutionary modernism of socialism (calling for a transcendence of capitalism), social Darwinism (justifying further imperialism, wars, class divisions, and poverty as necessary conditions for further progress), and a number of reformist positions lying between these two extremes. Modernity has also stimulated more radical critics who have questioned its fundamental assumptions, including the linear conception of history of Christian eschatology from which this culture emerged. The most significant of these antimodernist critics have been Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), philosophers who rejected the assumption that the history of European civilization and its expansion can be identified with progress.

In many ways Herder can be regarded as the most profound of these critics, having originated many of the central themes developed by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Herder argued against the primacy attributed by Enlightenment philosophers to universal principles and abstractions, and defended the concrete, the particular, sense experience, quality over quantity, and diversity against the pressures within modernity toward uniformity. He saw tendencies to justify suffering in the name of abstractions—the human species, civilization, progress—as cruel and sinister. Correspondingly, he rejected the mechanistic view of nature, representing nature as active and purposeful, a unity in which dynamic, purpose-seeking forces flow into each other, clash, combine, and coalesce. He argued that people are essentially sociocultural beings, largely formed by their particular language. In opposition to atomistic, utilitarian thinking he promulgated an ethics of self-expression or self-realization, calling on peoples and individuals to express the potentialities unique to them. Herder argued that different cultures have incommensurable but equally defensible values and ideals. He held that all "cultures" (the plural term was coined by him), both in the past and in the present, are significant in their own right and equally valuable, although he expressed considerable hostility to Europeans for their greed and aggression.

Where does Arne Naess's work stand in this context? In 1973, when Naess drew a distinction between "the shallow" and "the deep, long-range ecology movement," he characterized deep ecology as "rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of a relational, total-field image in which all organisms are seen as knots in the biospheric field of intrinsic relations," and as committed to biospherical egalitarianism in which all forms of life are accorded a deep respect. Deep ecology was presented as defending the complexity of ecosystems, economies, and ways of life, the decentralization of power, and local autonomy, and as opposed to elitism, either within or between nations. Naess has defended pluralism and an ethics of self-realization-taking "self-realization as top norm" and equating it with identification and unity with the whole of nature. To elaborate his position, Naess has invoked the philosophy of Spinoza and Asian traditions of thought. However, Naess's interpretations of Spinoza and Asian philosophies involve projecting onto them concepts deriving from Herder. Almost all Naess's ideas are echoes or developments of Herder's ideas. Naess's deep ecology is part of the tradition of antimodernism begun by Herder.

What, then, is the relationship between Naess's work and postmodernism? Postmodernism is essentially the form the antimodernist tradition has taken subsequent to the almost complete domination of the world by the culture of modernity. Deep ecology is a form of postmodernism.
The Deep Ecology of Postmodernism

Many of those who have identified themselves as postmodernists have merely rejected some small feature of modernity, such as modernist architecture or modernist literature. More significant are those who, disillusioned by socialist, particularly Marxist, forms of modernism, have attacked the whole of modernity. Such thinkers have been preeminently concerned to reveal the fractures and weaknesses in the culture of modernity, even to "celebrate" these fractures. They have been particularly concerned to avoid any move in response to these fractures toward a new totalizing perspective, a move that would simply promote a new phase of modernity. Consequently, they have embraced the work of the poststructuralists, the French philosophers who have developed the ideas of the antimodernist philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The most important of these philosophers are Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari. Lyotard immediately commands attention because he has explicitly aligned himself with the postmodernists. The most important sign of the disintegration of modernity, he argues, is "the incredulity towards metanarratives"; that is, the incredulity toward any metadiscourse appealing to some grand narrative-such as the recuperation of the rational, the liberation of the exploited, or the creation of wealth-which could legitimate all particular claims to knowledge. What does this mean? The loss of credibility of grand narratives means that people no longer believe in progress. Correspondingly, society is disintegrating into a plurality of heterogeneous language games.

Decision makers attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, on the assumption that their elements are commensurable and the whole is determinable; but this is not the case. Nor even scientific ideas are commensurable with each other, and scientific research therefore cannot be managed in this way. Science advances by "inventing" counterexamples, what is unintelligible from the perspective of received knowledge. Furthermore, science is revealing the world itself to be unpredictable. As Lyotard put it: "Postmodern science-by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, "(raeta," catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes-is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical."6 This clearly destroys efforts to justify science in terms of performance maximization.

Lyotard also defends difference over identity and the sensuous over the abstract, and attempts to chart a new kind of politics. However, these ideas are more fully developed by other poststructuralist philosophers. Celebrating difference, Derrida has carried on in a more radical form the work of Heidegger, the "destruktion" or, as Derrida put it, the "deconstruction" of the history of European metaphysics to overcome its oppressive effects. According to Derrida, the deepest desire of the Western philosophical tradition is to find some fixed, permanent center, a transcendental signifier that will give meaning to all other signs. To reveal what is being denied and to expose the arbitrary nature of all such efforts, Derrida argued that a binary opposition is assumed, one 'term of which is taken to be prior to and superior to the other.7 The second term is made out to be derivative, accidental, and unimportant in relation to the first, which is taken either as an ideal limit or as the central concept of a metaphysical system. The second term is then either effaced or repressed.

In this way metaphysics establishes ethical-ontological hierarchies based on subordination. Derrida's deconstructions involve showing how what is excluded as secondary and derivative is in fact at least as primordial and general as the metaphysical original. "Transcendental essences" that have been taken as absolute points of reference are shown to be arbitrary signifiers taken and then frozen from the chain of signifiers and privileged, or made to seem "natural," thereby freezing the play of differences and imposing a fixed structure and hierarchy on society. By subverting the fixation of meaning that legitimizes exclusive, powerful groups, deconstruction enables those who have been suppressed and marginalized by Western civilization-the colonized, women, those outside the academies-to be heard.

Derrida's work begins and ends with semiotics, although he has attempted to show its political relevance. Deleuze, like Derrida, defended the primacy of difference over identity but, following Foucault, treated semiosis as practice, as one force among others in a field of power. And, in opposition to other poststructuralists, he embraced Nietzsche's physicalism. Difference was seen not simply in relation to signs but also within the world. To elaborate a Nietzschean philosophy of nature, Deleuze drew on the ideas of the Stoics; on the philosophies of Lucretius, Spinoza, and Bergson; and on various developments within science and mathematics. Henri Bergson, with his defense of intuition, different orders of duration, multiplicity, and creative becoming, was the most important source for developing this elaboration, and Deleuze called for a return to Bergson, for "a renewal or an extension of his project today, in relation to the transformations of life and society, in parallel with the transformations of science."8 Deleuze, along with Guattari, strove to develop a new way of writing and a new kind of politics free from old organizational forms. Rather than the "arborescent" system that has dominated Western thought, the kind-of system
conforming to the model of a tree in which all branches stem from a central trunk (that is, where all truths are ultimately derived from a single principle). Deleuze and Guattari organized their work as a "rhizome" system, comparable to the root systems of bulbs and tubers, in which any point can be connected to any other point. This rhizomic organization of their thought was joined with a call for a new kind of politics, a "nomadic politics," in place of "the politics of the sedentary."

Deleuze and Guattari strove to free politics from totalizing paranoia, to withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the negative and to affirm what is positive: "difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems"; to develop "action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization." According to them, they formulated a conception of political action based on the metaphor of grass: "Of all the imaginary existences we attribute to plant, beast and star the weed leads the most satisfactory life of all. True, the weed produces no lilies, no battleships, no Sermons on the Mount.... Eventually the weed gets the upper hand. Eventually things fall back into a state of China. This condition is usually referred to by historians as the Dark Age. Grass is the only way out."

The poststructuralists, in extending the antimodernist ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger, have brought more fundamentally into question the central notions not only of modernity but of the whole of European civilization. Nietzsche and Heidegger have already been recognized as of central importance to deep ecology. Insofar as the poststructuralists are continuing their work, they also free us from the assumptions that have justified the reduction of nature to a mere instrument. They have attacked the grand narratives that identified progress with the total domination and control of the nonhuman world. They have celebrated new developments in science that focus on undecidables, the limits of precise control, catastrophes and pragmatic paradoxes, undermining at the very core of Western culture the ideal of total control through the advance of knowledge. And they have brought into question the hierarchies that allowed us to treat non-European civilizations, the uncivilized, and the realm of nature as the deficit Others in relation to the rise of European culture and civilization.

While such work does not lead immediately to an appreciation of the intrinsic significance of nature, the dynamic physicalism that is required to account for the indeterminacy, unpredictability, and uncontrollability revealed by postmodern science-the physicalism of Nietzsche and Bergson promoted by Deleuze and Guattari-makes this difficult to avoid. This, essentially, is the conclusion of Guattari. The revolution in mentalities that he calls for is required to "give back to humanity-if it ever had it-a sense of responsibility, not only for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of the cosmos." And, Guattari argues, it is the Greens who have realized the possibilities of the new nomadic politics. As he suggested in an interview: "There is, perhaps, a new alliance in the process of formation among those who refuse to see the forests destroyed, immigrants treated as cattle, huge amounts of money devoted by military budgets, which is to say, among the Greens.... In my opinion, it is the only hope of escaping the present impasse." Although Guattari is the only poststructuralist to have fully embraced the environmental movement, he has shown that poststructuralist postmodernism is implicitly a form of deep ecology.

Integrating Deep Ecology and Postmodernism

Once the connection between deep ecology and poststructural postmodernism is understood, these traditions of thought can provide support for one another in their confrontation with the culture of modernity. Environmentalists, and particularly deep ecologists, are losing political ground. With nation-states in permanent economic crisis, with the growing impoverishment and economic insecurity of vast numbers of people in all zones of the world economy, and with transnational corporations mobilized to neutralize whatever gains the environmentalists have made in the past, environmental issues are increasingly being pushed off the political and economic agenda. Deep ecologists and other radical environmentalists now appear to be little more than one pressure group among others, or utopian idealists who can be bracketed out when it comes to making the really important economic and political decisions. Radical environmentalist political philosophies like Naess's, though inspiring to supporters, lack teeth. Poststructuralists, who have grappled with issues of power, how it is maintained, and how it can be undermined, provide a crucial resource to environmentalists.

Conversely, postmodernists are looking increasingly irrelevant as the market, like a rhizome or a weed, is penetrating and taking over the most remote corners of the world and the most intimate facets of everyday life. Modernity has been revamping itself on a global scale, and a new, vibrant modernism, in the form of economic rationalism underpinned by a refurbished social Darwinism promoted by transnational corporations, financiers, and media barons-now prevails almost everywhere. This has reinstated the grand narrative of economic
growth through increasing instrumental efficiency and the domination of nature in a more vigorous form than ever. Postmodernists can no longer assume that modernity will disintegrate by itself and hope that simply promoting this disintegration will pave the way for a less oppressive society. Only the risks associated with environmental destruction provide an insurmountable problem for the culture of modernity. And, as Guattari noted, it is the environmentalists who are making a constructive response to the present situation.

Zimmerman's Critique of Deep Ecology

However, it is not only the positive aspects of the relationship between postmodernism and deep ecology that are of importance. Also of significance are the dangers that become apparent when postmodernism and deep ecology are seen in relation to one another as parallel developments of antimodernism.

The dangers of antimodernism have become the central concern of Michael Zimmerman. In his book Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity, Zimmerman posed a problem: "Having once read Heidegger's thought as partly compatible with deep ecology, I now ask whether deep ecology in particular and radical ecology in general are in fact compatible with a reactionary type of anti-modernism." 17 Zimmerman initially championed Heidegger to deep ecologists, but came to see Heidegger's philosophy as inextricably linked to Nazism. He now sees deep ecology as capable of fostering a reactionary type of antimodernism that could inspire a similar and equally disastrous political upheaval.

Of course this could be regarded as ascribing guilt to Naess and deep ecology by association. Naess himself is far too subtle a thinker to say anything that could give sustenance to reactionary antimodernism. His own thinking is strongly influenced by the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, and he has distanced himself from the more fervent views of Warwick Fox and George Sessions. And all deep ecological thought is suffused with pacifism. But it is not the avowed beliefs of philosophers that must be judged, or even the immediate logical implications of their ideas, but what is the effect of embracing them. As Zimmerman put it: "Though deep ecologists are not ecofascists, I can imagine how—in the context of perceived ecological and economic emergency—ideas drawn from their writings could be used to support neofascist programs. Today, reactionary politicians still condemn the 'over-population' of inferior races, decry racial 'mongrelization,' and criticize industrial pollution for contaminating the soil that nourishes, the 'blood' of the people. Though rejecting such racist views, deep ecologists—like Rousseau before them—often appeal to 'nature' as a standard by which to criticize modern societies." 18

While Zimmerman does not consider the ideas of Herder, Herder's philosophy with its defense of nationalism has also been criticized for feeding into Nazi ideology (despite Herder's pacifism), along with Nietzsche's elitist ethics of the Ubermensch and his apologists for the cruelty of ancient ruling classes. In fact the whole tradition of antimodernism was a major component of Nazi ideology—which, in accordance with it, celebrated nature and was centrally concerned with environmental issues. It was a "religion of nature." 19 Hitler denounced the evils of modernity and called for renewed contact with elemental forces and the restoration of folk customs, traditions, and attitudes. Zimmerman's contention is supported by situating Herder, Nietzsche, Heidegger, elements of Nazism, and deep ecology within and as part of the tradition of antimodernism.

What is it about the antimodernist tradition that gives it its explosively destructive potential? Zimmerman suggests that it has a tendency to cater to "the widely shared desire to surrender one's separate-self sense and to be absorbed in a larger Whole." 20 If this is the case, then poststructuralist thought provides a corrective to "deep ecology by opposing all essentialist and foundationalist tendencies." 21 For instance, in developing his concept of Self-realization, Naess brings together four sets of opposing terms: identification and alienation, oneness and plurality, wholeness and fragmentarity, and Self-realization and Self-abnegation. 22 In each case one term of a binary opposition is privileged, and it is through this that the norm of Self-realization as identification and unity with the whole of nature, in the unfolding of one's own potentialities, is defined in a way which tends to privilege it as a transcendental essence through which all else can be judged. It is this binary opposition that could be used to undermine the separate self-sense, despite Naess's intentions. "Deconstructing" it subverts the tendency to essentialism by showing how "alienation," "plurality," "fragmentarity," and "Self-abnegation" are the condition for, and are required for, Naess's privileged terms having any meaning. Appreciating that these notions acquire their meaning only through the terms they are defined in opposition to, and must endlessly be redefined in this way, provides support for Naess's skepticism.

However, there are other problems with antimodernism that poststructuralist thinking exacerbates. Antimodernism threatens the notion of the progressive emancipation of humanity that, in Zimmerman's view, has been responsible for vast improvements in political and social life. In this, Zimmerman joins forces with Jürgen Habermas. But there are significant and illuminating differences
between the two. Habermas is concerned to reconstruct the notion of emancipation by developing and defending the notion of communicative rationality as more primordial than instrumental rationality, in order to justify the notion of emancipation without recourse to metaphysics. The antimonist tradition, by undermining the power of reason to bring into question existing practices and institutions, is then seen by him as the main threat to the notion of the progressive emancipation of humanity. Zimmerman, by contrast, opts for a direct defense of the traditional notion of the progressive emancipation of humanity (and nature) as an inherent tendency with nature. He defends Ken Wilber's Neoplatonist or neo-Hegelian characterization of history as a process of evolving consciousness-first as a means of reconciling deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism, and second as a way of defending modernist (mental egoic) forms of consciousness-as a necessary stage toward nondual (playfully aware) forms of consciousness.

What this means is that whereas Habermas is hostile to the poststructuralists for continuing Nietzsche's and Heidegger's attacks on Western rationality, Zimmerman embraces and incorporates the poststructuralist opposition to absolutes into an expanded modernist vision of history as progress toward emancipation. While Habermas criticizes Derrida for fragmenting discourse and thereby undermining rationality, Zimmerman shows some sympathy for Derrida for subverting the quest for absolute foundations; although he expresses concern that the limited notion of self-realization Derrida allows cannot give a place to ecological concerns.

At the conclusion of Contesting Earth's Future, Zimmerman places Donna Haraway's postmodernist cyborgism at the center of the stage to illustrate what a higher form of consciousness would be. Opposing both the hyperproductivism of Western rationalism, which refuses to acknowledge any actor but One, and the transcendental naturalism of some radical ecologists, which settles on a sameness that only pretends to difference, Haraway calls on us to stop clinging to our gendered, organic, human identities and to participate in the dangerous, boundary-crossing, technological play that is our destiny. As Zimmerman approvingly describes her work: "Haraway seeks not to save nature in walled-off reserves, but rather to generate a politics of 'social nature,' that is, 'of a different organization of land and people, where the practice of justice restructures the concept of nature.'" Zimmerman argues that despite her abandonment of progressive narratives, Haraway's reference to the ideas of social justice shows her commitment to the progressive discourse of Enlightenment modernity and her compatibility with a more robust modernism. However, in opposition to Haraway, Zimmerman is "unwilling to abandon the idea that there is some direction to cosmic history, including human affairs"; rather, he suggests that "nondual awareness [exemplified by Haraway] plays the role of what Whitehead called a metaphysical lure that draws the Universe forward in the process of generating ever more complex forms of awareness." Though Zimmerman offers good reasons to be concerned about the possible explosive political consequences of deep ecological thought, how adequate is his proposed solution? What Zimmerman's analysis of deep ecology shows to be required is some means of accepting the antimonist critique of the dominating and oppressive tendencies of modernity without embracing its tendency to antihumanism or abandoning the emancipatory project of modernity. Ken Wilber's psychologized Neoplatonist historicism, focusing centrally on the problem of coming to terms with death, does not just ignore some of the greatest achievements of the Neoplatonist tradition (notably the Hegelian historical analysis of institutions). It also upholds a notion of cosmic progress that is difficult to defend in the current intellectual climate and does not break away from the Neoplatonist tendency to instrumentalize the present to a mere stage on the way to a higher end—arguably the root of its oppressive tendencies. Haraway's suggestion that we re-vision the world "as a coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse"—giving up the quest for mastery and searching for fidelity, knowing that we will be hoodwinked—suggests the lighthearted attitude of a domesticated postmodernism that has ceased to challenge the existing order.

The synthesis of these two thinkers does unite aspects of modernism and postmodernism, but it is questionable whether these are the most important aspects to unite. It embraces one of the most dubious features of modernism, the belief in cosmic purpose, while offering nothing comparable to Habermas's attempt to restore the power of reason to judge existing social institutions. This, in my view, is symptomatic of the weakness of this synthesis as a basis for appropriating the achievements of both modernity and antimodernity while transcending their limitations. It does not yet provide a strong enough basis for confronting the destructive imperatives and current crises of the existing global economic, social, and political system.

The Significance of Narratives

What alternative is there? My contention is that Lyotard, by focusing on narratives in general and grand narratives in particular, has identified a vital dimension of culture, a dimension that facilitates a fuller understanding of both the constructive and destructive aspects of modernity. While it makes possible a
deeper appreciation of the force of antimodernist (including deep ecologist and postmodernist) arguments against modernity, an understanding of the nature of narratives in general and grand narratives in particular points the way to overcoming the oppressive effects of modernity without abandoning its emancipatory project.

Since its origin in ancient Greece there has been a debate within European philosophy between those who have taken abstract thought as the way to the one, true reality, and those who in reaction to this have defended the senses, the particular, becoming, emotion, difference, the perspectival nature of knowledge, conflict, and action. Platonism in its many forms has defended abstractions as the true reality, and the culture of modernity can be regarded as a permutation of Platonism. Antimodernist philosophies, including postmodernism and poststructuralism, continue the tradition of anti-Platonism. Generally, they have defended the particular and the primacy of sense experience over universal abstractions, and becoming over being. Correspondingly they have extolled emotion or feeling against abstract principles, art against science, and practice (or praxis) against theory, arguing that all knowledge is perspectival.

Narratives occupy a peculiar middle ground between the particular and the universal, between sense experience and abstractions, between emotion and principles, between art and science, and between practice and theory; they also allow a diversity of perspectives to be represented and related to each other. Narratives, whether mythical, historical, or fictional, are preeminently conceived to grasp particulars and conflicts between different forces and projects; and they evoke emotions and orient people for action. But in doing so, they can deploy concepts at many levels of abstraction and have a significance that transcends their immediate reference.

These qualities of narrative are most clearly revealed by the phenomenological narratology of Paul Ricoeur and David Carr. Although they differ in details, Ricoeur and Carr see people as already living out inchoate narratives that prefigure explicitly formulated narratives. It is this prefiguration that enables them to understand and construct new emplotments to configure a diversity of events and actions into a narrative unity. Such constructed narratives create quasi worlds of characters and events that distance people from their worlds and the lives they are living, allowing them to embrace the new narrative emplotments and refigure their worlds and their lives. This refiguration can be of their lives as individuals or as members of groups, and narratives can refigure the lives of a diversity of individuals to form effective groups, ranging from informal small groups to communities, armies, nations, or civilizations. Carr in particular makes the point that narrative structures are essentially action structures of both individuals and groups, articulating large-scale actions into hierarchies of smaller actions. To be living out a narrative is to be striving to realize a complex of interrelated projects.

Narratives do not merely represent or construe actions of one individual or collective agent, and need not be confined to human agents. Narratives, almost always portray conflicts between forces, agents, and goals and the perspectives associated with these where the outcome is not predetermined. And as V. N. Volosinov (and M. M. Bakhtin) pointed out, narratives can do more than present and highlight conflicts of perspectives; through narratives, perspectives can be brought into dialogue with one another. In this way narratives, both those which are being lived out and those which merely have been constructed, can be contrasted, questioned, criticized, evaluated, and reformulated. This possibility provides the basis for an alternative to Habermas’s reconceptualization of communicative rationality, and the basis for extending the scope of this rationality.

To begin with, narratives are central to all intellectual inquiry, enabling abstract ideas to be put into perspective and judged—something that cannot be achieved through abstract ideas alone. People entering fields of abstract inquiry such as logic, mathematics, or theoretical physics are able to situate themselves within the field, to appreciate what has been achieved in the past and the problems that now must be addressed, and their significance, by grasping the historical narrative of the field. Narratives also enable people to evaluate opposing ideas. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted, major advances in science, advances that break all the old criteria of what counts as science, such as Galilean or Einsteinian physics, can be appreciated as such only through the new narratives of past science which they facilitate. Such narrative evaluations at the same time orient people for further research efforts. Even ideas from radically different traditions in different cultures can be brought into relationship and judged through narratives.

Similarly, narratives provide the basis for judging between rival construals of situations associated with practical engagements, for choosing between ways of living and between rival narratives. To judge between ways of living is to judge between narrative figurations through which people are construing their world and living out their lives. Judgment requires the elaboration of one of the narratives already being lived out or the configuration of a new narrative to encompass and reveal both the achievements and the limitations of inconsistent alternatives. Such narrative configurations can then refigure both the worlds and the actions of people in their everyday lives. Narratives elaborated in this
way, which provide people with an orientation to life, evoke their emotions, and provide them with goals to strive for, are constructions that can always be brought into question. But they are not arbitrary constructions, and choosing between them is a rational affair able to justify and elicit provisional commitment.

While narratives have the resources to orient people for both theoretical and practical engagements, relate abstractions to particular situations, bring a diversity of perspectives into dialogue, and allow judgments to be made between them, they do not always do so. Epic narratives, for instance, distance characters’ actions and lives from the lives of normal people and presuppose the unquestionable validity of one perspective. Epics are, to use Bakhtin’s terminology, “monologic.”3 And as Bakhtin wrote of monologism: "With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness... Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word."33 The narrative of Christian redemption, while allowing that ordinary people can have a significant place within it, also presupposes the unquestionable validity of one perspective, taking this as an absolute truth and treating every person who does not share this narrative as an obstacle to or an enemy of the one true goal.

The culture of modernity, based on the secularization of this Christian narrative, shares its monologic structure. There is an assumption that there is one true perspective above all particular perspectives, and it also postulates one true goal. This assumption is shared by every modernist, whether Catholic, Protestant, or scientific materialist, social Darwinist, orthodox Marxist, or economic rationalist. It is also characteristic of the narratives defining most nations and most modern ethnic groups. Such narratives are based on “identity” thinking, taking for granted that the actors and their values have an absolute and immutable status in their own right—whether the actors be the chosen people, Christendom, humanity, the working class, or whatever. This provides an alternative diagnosis of the problems of modernity. It is the monologic nature of the grand narratives of modernity that has entrenched arborescent thinking and that has made modernity so oppressive to everything and everyone but the elect few.

If this is the case, then what is required to oppose the destructive tendencies of modernity is not the dissolution of grand narratives and the fragmentation of discourses, nor the embracing of a monologic grand narrative that culminates in a playful openness, but the creation of a “polyphonic” grand narrative which gives a place to rival perspectives; a grand polyphonic narrative to replace the existing monologic grand narratives. And given the power and resilience of grand narratives—as illustrated by the revival by economic rationalists (or, more accurately, market fundamentalists) of the grand narrative of global economic progress—it would appear that the only way to counter the dominant grand narrative is by proposing such an alternative capable of displacing it. A polyphonic grand narrative would have all the virtues of a conception of history as a struggle for both human and animal emancipation—without having to make any dubious claims for cosmic purpose and a teleology preexisting history. Thereby it would avoid the tendency to reduce the past and present, other life forms and other people, particularly those who do not share the grand narrative, to instruments of the final project.

Towards a Reconstructive Postmodernist Deep Ecology

If such a grand narrative could be created, its potential would be enormous. This is evident from the success of grand narratives in the past. The triumph of Christianity in Europe, the triumph of the Enlightenment in France and the United States, and the triumph of Marxism in Russia and China—and the power of these movements elsewhere—can be fully understood only in terms of the grand narratives they proffered that oriented people and organizations to the world and to each other, gave meaning and direction to people’s lives, and evoked immense efforts from people as participants in upholding the values and realizing the goals they projected. Only through these grand narratives is it possible to understand how scattered, small groups of people were able eventually to engender major cultural, social, and political movements that transformed civilizations. And this is what the deep ecologists must strive, for the sake of humanity and for all life, to achieve in the present.

Constructing a polyphonic rather than a monologic grand narrative would have several virtues. It would address simultaneously the arguments of poststructuralists against identity thinking, foundationalism, and the homogenizing effects of modernity; provide the basis for overcoming the dualism between culture and nature; justify the significance of diverse forms of life; and address the arguments of social ecologists, Habermas, and Zimmerman against the tendency of antimodernists to abandon the emancipatory quest of modernity. It would then allow the ideas of the poststructuralist postmodernists and the deep ecologists to be combined into a more effective political force.

What would it mean to forge a new grand narrative? Developing a new grand narrative would not be just a matter of formulating a story of the world with a new set of ultimate goals in terms of which all other goals and claims to
knowledge could be evaluated. A grand narrative, to be successful, is a contender for integrating civilization and, ultimately, the whole of humanity. To be successful, it must be embraced, and to be embraced, it must be believed. To begin with, a grand narrative is a history of the past that must prove itself by being more accurate and more profound than its rivals. Mainstream Western culture, celebrating the triumph of market mechanisms, economic individualism, science, and technology, on the one hand, and Marxism, seeing the present and the ideas dominating it as the outcome of class struggle, on the other, have competed ferociously over their alternative construals of the past in their efforts to demonstrate the greater credibility of each grand narrative and associated images of the future. Environmental historians along with antimodernist historians have made great strides in reconstruing the past of the world, highlighting the effects of the rise of agricultural societies, then civilizations and finally European civilization, capitalism and industrialization, on ecosystems and other species and on subjugated females, societies, cultures, and civilizations.34

Even the perspectives of nonhuman organisms are being granted a place in such narratives.35 There is no reason why the agents of narratives cannot be nonhuman or even inanimate; there can be natural histories as well as histories of human actors, and all living beings as actors can be represented as having their own perspectives on the world. Conceiving living beings in such terms inevitably changes our attitude toward them. The real force of Aldo Leopold’s writings, which have continued to elicit concern for all living beings, is their capacity to evoke the perspectives of different animals.36 It is at least partly through appreciating perspectives of other cultures and other organisms that their intrinsic significance is coming to be recognized and appreciated.

Such histories, by revealing the blindness of previous histories and rediscovering and revealing the force of previously suppressed ideas, facilitate a new understanding of the present and, along with this, provide the foundation for projecting an alternative vision of the future worth striving for: a civilization that, while promoting human welfare, would allow ecosystems and diverse species, societies, and cultures to flourish. For such a vision to be adopted by people, a vast number of more specific narratives would have to be reformulated to accord with it. The most important of these would be narratives defining nations, their pasts and futures, and narratives defining the research traditions of philosophy, history, and the natural and human sciences. However, more specific and more local narratives would also need to be reformulated to enable individuals to relate their particular lives to this new complex of narratives and to the new grand narrative.

A polyphonic grand narrative would transcend the opposition between objectivism and relativism. While monologic grand narratives presuppose the existence of and access to an absolute perspective, and construct identities from this perspective as immutable—which identities in turn provide support to the absolute perspective-polyphonic narratives accept that all claims to knowledge are perspectival. But as we have seen, instead of drawing relativist conclusions from this, polyphonic narratives represent diverse, self-developing perspectives and bring these into relationship. In so doing, they are able to move toward less limited perspectives. A polyphonic grand narrative would have a rhizome structure and represent a great diversity of perspectives, allowing all these to challenge each other so that whichever one was taken to be the most promising, would be taken so only provisionally, on the assumption that it would be open to further challenges in the future. It also would be assumed that people in their everyday lives would be included as participants in this narrative and would be free to challenge it and participate in its reformulation. A narrative of world history constructed on polyphonic lines would strive not merely to evaluate the past from a favored perspective of the present, but also to comprehend the world, including the present, from the perspectives of past cultures and traditions of research as well as the perspectives of existing rival cultures and traditions of thought, and to recognize the challenge of these to the favored perspective.

The tendencies toward domination and homogenization of monologic grand narratives would be opposed by a polyphonic grand narrative that, by acknowledging its own limitations and the claims of other points of view, would promote the development of diverse local perspectives in order to reveal its own blind spots, and then encourage challenges to it from these perspectives. This encouragement of diversity would not imply that local perspectives, claims to knowledge, and narratives could not be criticized and even attacked from the broader perspective of the grand narrative. A polyphonic grand narrative would encourage cultural diversity, then strive to bring this diversity of perspectives into dialogue.37

This would involve acknowledging what has been achieved by modernity as well as criticizing it. Rationality would then not be attenuated but reformulated as relational or “dialogical,” and thereby strengthened. The cultivation of participation in the criticism and reformulation of received narratives would be a major goal of a polyphonic grand narrative and, along with providing people with the means to live out the narratives they have subsequently committed themselves to, should be regarded as an essential component of the quest to emancipate people from irrationality.38
The identities constituted by such a grand narrative and its subnarratives, including the narratives of nations, communities, and individual lives, would always be recognized as relational and provisional, as identities in process of becoming, always acknowledging their inevitable limitations and subject to perpetual questioning and reformulation. Rather than "self-realization," implying a preexisting immutable "self" (of an individual, community, nation, civilization, or whatever) that is to be realized, what is called for by polyphonic narratives is a creative response by socially situated individuals, groups, institutions, and societies to the uniqueness of their situations and their potentialities by continually reformulating, through dialogue, their narratives. Such narratives call for self-creation of individuals, organizations, societies, and civilizations to become semiautonomous participants in the becoming of the world.

However, more is required of a new, polyphonic grand narrative than to overcome the deficiencies of modernism and antimodernism, and to reconcile and support poststructuralist and deep ecologist perspectives. It should also make opponents of the dominant grand narrative more politically effective. As I have suggested, merely linking deep ecology and postmodernism could strengthen both. The environmental crisis manifest in the increasing risks that individuals and organizations have to confront in everyday life is undermining the legitimacy of existing institutions. When the ideas of the poststructuralists are seen as a response to this situation, their work can be appreciated for exposing the way the existing social order has been reproduced, overcoming the frozen dualisms of the culture of modernity and revealing what kinds of political action can be taken that will not reproduce or strengthen the existing order.

What is required, as Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, is a nomadic politics. This concurs with the kind of political action called for by Arne Naess. It should be noted at this point that, of those French philosophers designated as poststructuralists, only Lyotard has aligned himself with the postmodernists, and Guattari, identifying postmodernism with Lyotard's philosophy, has attacked it. See Pierre-Felix Guattari, "The Postmodern Impasse," in The Guattari Reader, pp. 109-113.

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22. Ibid., pp. 171ff.
34. There are now too many works contributing to this to be listed.
35. A fictional narrative of human history from the perspective of a rat has been offered by Gunter Grass in The Rat, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Pan Books, 1988).
38. This idea is developed more fully in Gare, Nihilism Inc., chapter 16, where it is shown to connect with notions of justice, duty, and integrity, and is elaborated as a political philosophy.