

Introduction

The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent. That does not mean superficial fault-finding with individual ideas or conditions, as though a philosopher were a crank. Nor does it mean that the philosopher complains about this or that isolated condition and suggests remedies. The chief aim of such criticism is to prevent humankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members.

—Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*

The well-known is such because it is well-known, not known.

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Ecology and Critical Theory

At no other time in history has a more rational, ecological society appeared so close, and yet so far. Never before the twentieth century did our species face such catastrophes of a world-historical nature as those that the potentialities of technology, subsumed under the instrumental reason of capitalistic forces, have unleashed. And yet if the ethical goals of the Enlightenment were not merely cruel illusions, the dialectic of world history still contains complexes of contradictions that promise redemption from all of the worst social and ecological calamities the prevailing trajectory of globalized capitalism will inevitably unleash.

However, there is so much that passes for ecological thought in our time that remains erroneous, wayward, and poorly developed. The reverence for ecology in popular thought redolent of our era may arise out of well-intentioned aesthetic and ethical desires of individuals, but so often it is crippled by the prevailing ideologies of market society and its

mass culture, dissolving into petitioning, individual lifestyle choices, or the acquisition of more ecologically friendly travel options or property. To think in terms of the social structures that will benefit the destiny of our world's biosphere seems to be what is both sorely lacking, and desperately needed in our present historical moment. This wish at once expresses that the unspeakable, and for many unthinkable, hope that capitalism's egoistic struggle for existence, which is anathema to the development of a genuinely compassionate worldview and the pursuit of ethical life, might be done away with and a sense of mutual aid between sentient beings restored to its rightful place. To impart humanity's relationship with the natural world with an ethical aspect, nothing less seems necessary than building a new type of society where all sentient life is revered within an overarching ethical framework, as opposed to a system of competition and domination where, as Rosa Luxemburg highlighted in her ethically charged work, the accumulation of capital takes precedence over life itself.¹

Nevertheless, such a spirit of hope, whether it falls under the label of Marxism, social ecology, or whatever else, would meet with ruination were it to naively avail itself, in the manner of much faddish "popular philosophy," of the prevailing concepts of nature espoused by political and social elites and subsequently integrated into mass culture. Such concepts, taken up as if they were somehow free from ideology, would offer no more hope against catastrophe than the fervent prayers of the Abbasids of Baghdad as the Golden Horde of the Mongols descended upon them. Capitalism's ideological hegemony, which seems destined to terminate in the reduction of organic life into the inorganic death of the commodity-form, cannot foresee a means beyond a state of affairs in which the earth's biosphere is slowly destroyed in the pursuit of profits. What appears more natural than wilderness to many individuals nowadays is the "nature" of the profiteers and the monolithic industries that place their rude stamp on the skylines of our metropolises. It is for such reasons that the concept of nature ought to always be reproached, following the inclination of Marxian theory, with the suspicion of reified consciousness. Even the concept of "ecology" betrays something of this in its popular association with that of the system. A nature rendered into an "ecosystem" by its cover concept, mechanized into flowcharts of constituent parts, "inputs" and "outputs," already betrays its mediated character as the reflected image of the exchange society that in practice violates the ecological logic—such as symbiosis—of the earth's eco-communities and rives them into little more than an instrumental analytics.

To this end, prevailing trends in the ecology movement may eagerly market ready-made slogans and correctives like commodities; but what they usually do not provide, in the spirit of a Socrates, are worthwhile questions that will interrogate the claims of ideological hegemony and spur society into a consciousness of its own discontents. Why, we may ask, despite the activities of half a century of a popular, global, and well-publicized ecology movement, is our planet still dying? Why is its all but inevitable destruction not being halted by the protests and petitions of liberal mass movements, and why are phenomena like global pollution, ocean acidification, global warming, deforestation, and species extinction proceeding at an unprecedented rate? We are often accosted at our front doors or in the streets by well-meaning young people for this or that NGO; we are often told to “vote with our feet,” to purchase green products or “eco-friendly” solutions, or to vote for an increasingly narrow alternative of pro-capitalist parliamentary parties. And yet the prevailing logic of the very society that has led to the crisis remains unquestioned, no less among the so-called Left as elsewhere.

For these reasons, a critical ecological theory would be characterized by a negative dialectic: a dialectic of suspicion directed against the conceptual formations that have arisen out of the ideological hegemony underpinning the ecological crisis. This study hopes to provide a foundation for such an undertaking. It seeks to examine to what extent prevailing concepts of nature in Western philosophy, formed out of the historical contradictions of bourgeois society, reify the very logic underlying the social ideologies responsible for the crisis, and thereby implicitly prevent the existing society from becoming fully conscious of its range of historical potentialities. Consequently, it also aims to draw out immanently, via a critique of the bourgeois nature concept, the vestige of the social mediations according to which “nature” has taken on a contradictory character. It seeks to reveal how, in some of the most decisive moments of philosophical history, nature has appeared contradictorily as both potentiality to be subsumed by human civilization and yet also as a repository for repressed social hopes and unconscious impulses. Both of these images of nature remain ultimately abortive and undeveloped between the Enlightenment and this present historical juncture; and yet both must still, in their most rational and ethical moments, become the basis of a determinate negation in which a new, more ecological society could emerge, sustained by a cohesive ethical framework. Such a determinate negation, although always aware of its own inadequacy as thought, can

provide us with an intellectual foundation for coherent and revolutionary ecological movements—an intellectual foundation that Murray Bookchin chose to call a dialectical naturalism.

On Some Limitations of Contemporary Nature Ontologies

The global prevalence of the ecological crisis has generated a substantial renaissance in nature philosophy within contemporary Western scholarship. Having provided an outline of this book, the extent to which its interpretation of the dialectic and application to nature philosophy, in the form of dialectical naturalism, differs from several prominent traditions in contemporary nature philosophy should be clarified.

One of the most promising developments in contemporary Western nature philosophy has been charted by the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour, who—in two of his most recent books, *Politics of Nature* (2004) and *Reassembling the Social* (2005)—expansively examines the failures of political ecology and various movements of mainstream environmentalism in terms of a lack of truly democratic deliberation governing the prevailing relationships between nature and technology, coupled with a critical rethinking of the interplay between social structure and subjective agency in modern life. For Latour, the distinction between fact/value and human/nonhuman emerges as a product of modernist ideology and positivism (or scientism) and is not ontologically beyond question, or to be taken as a given in philosophical speculation.² It is against this background—which closely parallels the Frankfurt School's critique of positivism—that Latour develops the notion that “nature” is a concept better sublimated into that of the “collective,” inclusive of human and nonhuman life and “technologies,” which, potentially at least, can democratically determine an ethics and a means of interacting with environments beyond immediate localities, including the ecological foundations of the planet.³ Latour goes further than this in *Reassembling the Social* by way of a radical rethinking of metaphysics as such, resolving into an *imago* of a metaphysical life that is subjectively formed, and conditions—with a rationality uniquely its own—a given individual's experience with the social world.⁴ Its rich and dynamic interest in subjective agency gives philosophical form to many insights of contemporary depth psychology, and its attempt to reground ontology in the terrain of psychological uniqueness—in Schopenhauer's terms, the *principium*

individuationis—has important implications for the critical interpretation of democracy and the interaction between ecology and collective governance, notwithstanding the ethical ambiguities of Latour’s relativism.

Interestingly, the novelty of Latour’s focus upon the interrelatedness of social and environmental problems complements Bookchin’s own interest in revitalizing the life of democratic collectives and its accompanying critique of the prevailing ideas under which the concept of nature has been captured by bourgeois, positivistic thought within various strands of the environmental movement. Moreover, Latour’s interest in the plurality of ontological claims, beliefs and statements that originate with individuals, and the forms according to which these condition actions and influence institutions, might be viewed as giving a much-needed psychological grounding for how we explore the possibilities of social change along the lines of more ecologically harmonious values. On the other hand, Latour’s use of parliamentary metaphors and frequent reference to professional politicians in *Politics of Nature* suggests that he has not gone far enough in developing a truly critical account of democratic governance beyond the ideological confines of purely “representative” forms of democracy, wherein the ethical interests of actual communities are largely marginalized by political and economic elites. The political theory of communalism, as developed by Murray Bookchin, may therefore offer a compelling corrective that points toward the possibility of reconfiguring the relationship between ecology and human communities by way of revolutionary changes in social institutions.

A similar theoretical impasse arises in the recent work of William Connolly and Timothy Morton on political ecology. In Connolly’s *Facing the Planetary*, for instance, a politics of “swarming” via interlinked political movements is advanced as a hypothesis for overcoming the dire ecological calamities unleashed by globalized late capitalism.⁵ Yet despite an insightful critique of “sociocentrism” and a valuable attempt to theorize the natural world beyond humanity as self-organizing, Connolly’s theory ultimately terminates with the well-trodden ground of encomiums toward general strikes and platformist, pluralist “swarms” of democratic movements, bereft of any more concrete blueprint as to how a more ecological society could emerge institutionally out of the dialectical contradictions of late capitalism. Morton, even more drastically, regresses to a constructivist view of society-nature relationships, reducing the ecological crisis to a problem of poetics,⁶ or perhaps more starkly, seeking to render the earth’s eco-communities into a “mesh” of living and nonliving things.⁷

The lack of a philosophical foundation that overcomes the problem of monism, redolent in late capitalism's blurring of technology and ecological degradation, stands out as a weakness in Morton's work, and the lack of a model for an ecological society, as distinct from merely ecological movements within the framework of formal, or "representative" democracy, remains an unresolved quandary for both.

This is not so for the radical theory of Guattari and Deleuze—particularly so in the contribution to social ecology advanced in the former's *The Three Ecologies*—who counterpose "dissident subjectivities" and autonomous, egalitarian direct-democratic formations to the growth of psychological infantilization and passivity generated by the mass media, as the basis of a broader ecological movement.⁸ The far-sighted holism of Guattari's concept of the three ecological registers—that is, the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity⁹—and the need to articulate an ethical and political solution to their prevailing global degradation, furnishes a refreshingly *psychological* critique of the ecological crisis. In Guattari's words:

Social ecology will have to work towards rebuilding human relations at every level of the socius . . . it is equally imperative to confront capitalism's effects in the domain of mental ecology in everyday life: individual, domestic, material, neighbourly, creative or one's personal ethics. Rather than looking for a stupefying and infantilizing consensus, it will be a question in the future of cultivating a dissensus and the singular production of existence.¹⁰

Yet while there is much that is valuable in Guattari's articulation of the three ecologies in terms of a prognosis of the ecological crisis, as for many other contemporary political ecologies, a more precise framework for the cultivation of such a "dissensus" remains evasive and difficult to operationalize into a concrete politics. Without an anchoring in the anthropological foundations of the ecological crisis—the prehistory of prevailing "mental ecologies," as it were—nor a theoretical structure that would acculturate the development of technology and an ethical system within a plausible institutional blueprint of direct democracy, we are left without a coherent theory of dialectical transition from an ecologically informed dissensus to the social production of an ecologically informed *ethics*.

This problem is attacked from a different angle in the work of political theorists such as Robyn Eckersley, who in her more recent scholarship has attempted to devise a plausible theoretical model for a “green” state.¹¹ What delimits the work of scholars like Eckersley from the more historical approach to ecology advanced by Western Marxism and Bookchin is the more critical orientation of the latter on the question of the ecological merits of prevailing power systems of capitalism and the nation-state and how these, arguably, function to prevent the achievement of a veritably ecological society. As will be later explored in this text, the very notion that an ecological society is possible under the prevailing norms of liberal internationalism is one that a dialectical naturalism would invariably answer in the negative. What is crucial in formulating this answer is the problem of reification and, in particular, how liberal or social-democratic theorists of ecology may fail to resist the conquest of nature conceptually, by the reifying forms of late capitalism.

Despite the increasingly popular interest in political ecology redolent of our times, then, what we are so often lacking is a *historical* understanding of how Western thought has reflected the dominant ideas that have covered over nature with their concepts and have blinded civilization to its more rational and ecological potentialities. Contemporary environmental movements could therefore gain much from a critical evaluation of historical nature philosophy. A critical theory of ecology would offer a compelling vantage point for assessing the merits of various political theories by examining the kind of nature depicted by the most influential of philosophers, derived from the epistemological foundation, quite basic to critical theory and social ecology alike, that nature and politics are inextricably linked. This is demonstrated by Murray Bookchin, quite uniquely, in his illustration of the anthropology of hierarchy and its conditioning of historical reifications of nature. The interrelatedness of nature and politics in this sense has many ramifications, especially for aesthetics. In a world that is increasingly denatured, in which many children grow up in harsh urban environments overstimulated by technology and awash in various forms of pollution, the kind of human-ecological relationships we ought to work toward building in our communities becomes a fundamentally political, ethical, and aesthetic question. In order to begin to find the answers, we must first ask the right sort of questions. And in particular, we must seek to comprehend how the prevailing conceptual understanding of what *is* nature is a product of a social history that is reflected in the

most influential themes of Western philosophy. This interest is one that many disparate environmentalists and ecologists surely share.

Reification and the Historical Context of Nature Philosophy

What social forces and factors ossify a given image of nature into a pervasive, cultural reification? It would seem that, up until the Enlightenment, various concatenations of social domination simply lacked the technologies of mass media, propaganda, and industrial economies of scale to create a reifying mass culture. And yet, we are also struck by the contradictions and emancipatory impulses brooding under the surface of contemporary mass culture, along with the pervasiveness of certain cultural ideas of nature in times past, despite the absence of sophisticated technologies of dissemination. What appears difficult to deny is that concepts of nature are always closely wedded to prevailing ideological refrains, and these are bound up within a cultural dialectic. For instance, when the Hellenic democrats invoked reason, they indicated something more substantial, and with greater ethical content, than the imperialist honorifics of Sparta or the instrumental reason of Thucydides's rhetoric might suggest. They expressed not a blind faith in the masses as such, but a rational faith in the virtues of democratic deliberation and personal responsibility to the *polis*; precisely this was what Pericles often appealed to in his funeral oration. Yet on the other hand, he also appealed to the apparently reasonable self-interest of a community of slave-owning patriarchs to preserve their imperial spoils and to avoid retribution for all of the various evils, petty and mighty, of the Athenian Empire. Such was the "nature" of the democratic Athenian culture in Hellenic times.

The origins of Western nature philosophy in the thought of presocratics illustrates the extent to which nature has been permeated by a variety of such cultural-historical reifications.¹² Though marred by often unbridgeable differences, what the presocratics, and the Hellenes more generally shared was a belief that the *kosmos* could be understood as intelligible and rational—a point of view that not only signified a break with various forms of religious mysticism but signaled a point of departure from a mythopoeic worldview to a greater degree of enlightened secularism, as Gregory Vlastos has emphasized.¹³ For many of the presocratics the notion that nature could be understood rationally was

directly derived from the idea that the *polis* or political community had its own objective standards of rationality.

The life of Anaximander of Miletus (born 610 BCE) offers an illuminating example of this origin. Anaximander's historical period was approximately coterminous with Solon's reforms in Athens, which were a significant turning point in the Hellenic world toward direct democracy. Such substantive democracy, needless to say, must be distinguished from the fictive bourgeois myth of representative "democracy." The radical connotations of *deme* can be taken to signify the confederal and participatory meeting of the "tribes" or "councils" directly populated by citizens, a form of intricately democratic social administration all but lost to us today.¹⁴ At any rate, what is most compelling about Anaximander is that his nature philosophy seems to reflect a social viewpoint that, unlike the historical duality analyzed later in this study, neither perceived nature as a lifeless "other" nor as a reified "oneness" into which civilization ought to be dissolved. Rather, "nature" could only be made sense of, quite literally, within the nexus of social rationality; this metabolism alone constitutes the "whole." Thus, he stressed that there was a sense of "natural" equality bound up within change; conflict and strife may constitute the appearance of change but equality, not merely justice, is held to be its true essence. The natural world for Anaximander is rendered intelligible through its inherent rationality, just as the Athenian political culture is rendered intelligible to its citizens through its grounding in universal education (*paideia*) and their direct participation in governance through its political institutions.¹⁵

By the time of Empedocles's birth (492 BCE), Athens had entered its democratic phase, and the public fervor that underlay the democratic emphasis on popular assemblies, councils, and communal associations had begun to spread not only throughout Attica but also even to Sicily and Southern Italy. The close relation between the Hellenic notions of justice, natural equality, freedom and spontaneity, and the "spirit" of the Athenian democratic age can be observed in the structure of Empedocles's physics and cosmology. Empedocles, influenced by Parmenides, was convinced that there was no coming to be and no perishing in the world: "all is one." But Empedocles was clearly dissatisfied with the colorless immediacy of this form of monism. This "higher understanding" of a "oneness" of all things, he observed, seems to contradict what our senses reveal to us about the order of the world, involving as it does so much death and destruction alongside birth and renewal.¹⁶ Empedocles's solution was to suggest that while all the world is united into one totality of Being, it is comprised of

four elements or “roots” that are governed by the cosmological forces of what he calls Love and Strife.¹⁷ These elements, comprising earth, wind, fire, and water (“earth and the billowy sea and the damp air, Titan, and the ether . . .”) are “bound” in a “circle,” a totality of Being.¹⁸ Periodically, Love and Strife take turns at ruling over the physical world, which Empedocles represents as a “sphere”; this is much like Anaximander’s own cosmology, which emphasized justice and equality in the rotation of rule in the natural world. During the periods in which Love reigns, there is the greatest mixture and Strife is banished to the surface of the Sphere; when Strife reigns, there is the greatest amount of separation of the roots, and Love is banished to the surface. Although the present generation, according to Empedocles, may be one of great Strife and suffering,¹⁹ the strict equality of the roots in the *kosmos* means that, as Vlastos says, “none would be stronger than any of the rest . . . even when Strife rules the world, equality is a sufficient preventive of ‘injustice.’”²⁰

One could thus observe that Empedocles’s philosophy embodied philosophical reflection wedded to the forms of social totality that the Greek democrats of Attica, Southern Italy, and Sicily were beginning to objectify in a political form.²¹ This form was intimately mirrored in the conceptual mediations that many Hellenic nature philosophers placed in between their social experience and the world of nature. Vlastos discerns in his detailed commentary:

It is just this [democratic] political experience which furnished the pre-socratics with the conceptual pattern which they applied to the comprehension of nature as a rule of law, an autonomous, self-regulative system, whose orderly ‘justice’ was guaranteed by the assumed ‘equality’ of its components.²²

This development, as a characteristic example of a reifying tendency, seems to have been founded upon a unifying view of a rational *kosmos* in which the ecology of nature became an increasingly significant allegory for the material relations of society. Just as the pantheon of the Greek gods, in Feuerbach’s analysis, reflect the “naturalism” of the Hellenic worship of sensuality, Empedocles’s system of nature expresses a powerful optimism about the justice of rotational political powers vested in the citizenry.

Vlastos has further surmised the relation between the social relations of the Hellenic *demos* and the nature philosophy of the presocratics in the following, striking rejoinder to Nietzsche’s cult of the “aristocratic man”:

The adventurous reason of Ionian science charted [the] realm of magic, detached it from the personal control of supernatural beings, and integrated it into the domain of nature. All natural events, ordinary and extraordinary alike, were now united under a common law. The equality of the constituents of this new commonwealth of nature was of the essence of the transformation, for it meant the abolition of distinctions between two grades of being—divine and mortal, lordly and subservient, noble and mean, of higher and lower honor. It was the ending of these distinctions that made nature autonomous and *therefore* completely and unexceptionally “just.” Given a society of equals, it was assumed, justice was sure to follow, for none would have power to dominate the rest. This assumption, as we have seen, had a strictly physical sense. It was accepted not as political dogma but as a theorem in physical inquiry. It is, nonetheless, remarkable evidence of the confidence which the great age of Greek democracy possessed in the validity of the democratic idea—a confidence so robust that it survived translation into the first principles of cosmology and medical theory.²³

In contrast, he goes on to note:

It was Plato, the bitter critic of the Athenian democracy, who carried through the intellectual revolution (or, more strictly, counterrevolution) to a successful conclusion; and Aristotle followed . . . in their systems we find at last the explicit and thorough-going negation of Anaximander’s equalitarian universe.²⁴

Plato’s and Aristotle’s thought imposed a distinction between “rational thought” and “rational thing” to the extent that they ended up “not . . . rationalizing material nature but . . . degrading matter to the realm of the irrational, the fortuitous, and the disorderly.”²⁵ It is highly noteworthy that it was upon a very similar “counterrevolutionary” edifice—one that conceived nature as disorderly, irrational, and capricious—that the revolutionary bourgeois enlightenment was to build its own philosophies of nature. Not for faith in the process of direct democratic deliberation, nor for love of the naturalism of the senses and the freedom of sexual

desire, did the bourgeois enlightenment concern itself with the subject of nature. Rather, the repressive holding down of the proletarianized masses, the negative moral characterization of natural needs under the dominion of the patriarchal family and property, and the Dickensian oppression of the proletariat in line with the prerogatives of capital were to prove the most decisive in the intellectual character of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.²⁶

Yet the instrumental reason that epitomizes the social logic of capitalism was hardly without historical antecedents. Under the tyranny of the post-Macedonian and late Roman empires, the man formerly of the *demos* had already become the "private man," the "alienated soul" in Hegel's parlance; so too, with few notable exceptions, would the man of philosophy schools gradually become a paid professional, in short a *sophist*, hiring out his intellectual faculties to the appeasement of political elites. While the democratic tendencies of the Hellenes seemed to promise a unification of society and nature through the self-determining notion of *reason*, and therefore also projected this "rational" content, such as equality and justice, onto the natural world, the spirit of tyranny that snuffed out the flame of the *demos*, beginning with the struggles of Alexander's autocratic successors, was mirrored in the changing appearance of nature philosophy as it took shape during the ascendancy of Rome. Beginning with stoicism during the late Roman Empire, such changes were echoed subsequently in monotheistic theology's notion of a "natural" hierarchy. The natural world and social world alike could no longer be perceived as free, spontaneous, or sensually uninhibited; both sexuality and nature were forced into the chains of a metaphysical hierarchy that mirrored the really existing chains of the feudal and ecclesiastical relations.

Such developments had their philosophical forebears in the psychological orientation of the middle and late Stoa. Late Stoic philosophy galvanized intellection into an alienated private spiritualism devoid of social substance, oriented around a mystical concept of *logos*, or "nature." What is most remarkable about this nature-concept of late Roman Stoicism is that it seems to become culturally entrenched at a moment when, not without similarities to late, "neoliberal" capitalism, the masses had become politically disenfranchised and demoralized beneath the decadence of imperial conspiracies and the spectacular *panem et circenses* that simultaneously dominated and trivialized public life. Within this context of privation and the dissolution of objective culture, as Boethius demonstrated immanently in his prison cell, "nature" becomes little more than a solipsistic phantom of subjective consolation against a decaying

social nexus. In the philosophy of Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, empirical reality even becomes secondary to a personalized, mythopoeic “oneness” with the *logos*, or substance of nature. Stoicism’s twisted reverence for this mystical *logos* was perhaps illustrated most dramatically in the disdain that Seneca showed for life when he committed suicide on Nero’s orders. Here, along with the origins of idealism and monotheistic sexual repression, also perhaps originates the negative characterization of nature that was to become a recurring feature of Western philosophy.

Under the oppression of such historical conditions, “nature” takes on a denuded ethical form divorced not only from the lived realm of society and human needs but, with no small sense of irony, from the concrete lifeways of broader ecologies. Hence, as the former social ecologist Janet Biehl has observed:

In “adequating” themselves to the cosmos, [the Stoics] were guided by the principle of apathy, not activity, except in the inner recesses of their private lives, as the writings of Epictetus so clearly demonstrate. The individual in declining Roman society could no more make a difference in the cosmos—or in society, for that matter—than could ordinary Mesopotamians and Egyptians millennia earlier.²⁷

Despite the global ecological crisis, does liberal environmentalism not confront a similar impasse to that which confronted the acolytes of Stoicism or Christianity in decaying Rome? According to Leo Löwenthal’s appraisal in the late 1980s, the Western environmentalist movement remains dominated by a liberal viewpoint that does not seek to theorize a social structure beyond capitalism.²⁸

Such reflections might serve to indicate what has been obscured in philosophy with the triumph of a global market society and the philistinism of its mass culture: the dialectical notion that all attempts to fuse ecology with politics must invariably point back to what Marx originally called the “metabolism” between nature and society. The latter, which the culture industry’s productions have denuded in the realm of popular thought, prolongs its actual existence only in an atrophied form: in the neoliberal rationality of a pseudo-subjective consumer “choice.” Late capitalist culture’s much-asserted nexus of “choice” and its attendant “identity” politics, however, ironically divests the subject of the democratic dimension that once infused itself with public life, a life in which alone

the essence of individuality was completed and attained. Against this, critical theory would maintain the viability of the thesis that just as true subjectivity cannot be realized through the liquidation of the subject into a totally administered mass culture, no more can nature be truly known by dissolving social relations into a mythopoeic "nature."

The Dialectic of the Nature-Concept

The first two chapters of this study concern themselves with a reconstruction of the ontologies underlying the nature-concepts of Kant, Fichte and Hegel, of Marx, and of two of the most canonical figures of anarchism: Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. The interest of the first chapter is to explore how a reified concept of nature emerges from German Idealism's conceptual splitting between universal and particular, subject and object, and private freedom and public unfreedom, whose origin, according to Herbert Marcuse, can be uncovered within the philosophy of Luther and Kant.²⁹ This theme is subsequently developed further through critical expositions on Fichte and Hegel, as well as something of a running digression on Feuerbach.

Though the first chapter does not depart beyond a critique of concept formation, it nevertheless canvases the material basis of the nature-concept that the capitalist mode of production ushered into culture in the form of both its instrumental reason and its psychological orientation. Most fundamental of all points of development is the observation that, by reducing nature to an unknowable otherness, market society distorts the very living substance of nature and transforms it into a more or less asocial, unmediated, and abstract otherness: the mere plastic determinateness of Fichte's non-Ego. Such reification still resonates in the contemporary ecology movement, particularly in many aspects of liberal environmentalism, the ideological descendant of the liberal movements of the nineteenth century. To the extent that the first chapter is relevant to contemporary politics, its critique is directed at the ideological similarities between the idealist nature-concept of the nineteenth century and the nature-concept redolent of the liberal ecology movement of the twenty-first century. It also takes care to illustrate, however, what moments in Hegel were not identical with the steady march of the bourgeois pathology of anti-naturalism, what moments were more congenial to the development of a dialectical naturalism that elsewhere remained obscure in his system.³⁰

Capitalism's ruthless imposition of the exchange economy at the expense of social freedom and human needs was laid bare by Marx. And yet, in accordance with the presuppositions of historical materialism first worked out in *The German Ideology*, Marx's understanding of the society-nature relationship was often colored by a positive evaluation of the acculturation of nature into the industrial machinery of the capitalistic World-Spirit. This contradiction forms the subject of the second chapter, which illustrates how Marx's later writings retained a somewhat positivistic championing of the nature-concept of the bourgeois enlightenment. Here it is contended that the nature-concept of bourgeois political economy was in certain subtle ways fundamental to the viewpoint of the mature Marx as well, who abandoned his Feuerbachian concept of human-nature relations. This unreflective continuity with bourgeois thought is, notwithstanding, quite at odds with the younger Marx's impulses and with his dialectical theory of society more generally, which resists reification.

On the other hand, what remains one of the greatest undertakings of modern anarchism, a political philosophy strongly influenced by a romantic cultural tendency, was its attempted recovery of the possibilities of an ecological ethics. Anarchism departed dramatically from the bourgeois enlightenment in defending the allegedly "natural" basis of society, redolent in its notions of "natural law" and the "instincts" of "mutual aid" that were assumed to govern the ontological substance of natural being. By seeking values that are essentially communitarian and what Bookchin once called, drawing on Aristotle's *Politics*, "humanly scaled," the great virtue of anarchism was to advance a political principle that, opposed to "the state" or indeed to social "authority" as such, at once aimed to recover the "natural" dimension of society vanquished in the colonizing waves of statist civilization.

However, within its excessive zeal for natural law and individualism, anarchism tends to pass over into an empty valorization of the natural. Deriving its ethical precepts not from an immanent criticism of the particular rationality of the prevailing society on its own terms—and by extension its dialectic with the natural world—but rather, as it were, from a transcendent moralism presumed to originate in the immediacy of "natural" relationships, anarchism presupposes moral criteria that emanate from a universal instinctivism, or in Kropotkin's terms "sociability," rather than from *determinate* social relations, culture, or history as such. Precisely because of their allegedly "unnatural" character, the historical and social mediation of "nature" is at once abandoned and thought lapses into a

fetish of natural authenticity. This appeal to the authority of “nature” is here criticized immanently, following Hegel’s insight, as articulated by Adorno, that “immediacy always already contains something other than itself—subjectivity—without which it would not be ‘given’ at all, and by that token it is already not objectivity.”³¹ In an antagonistic totality characterized by mass manipulation, in which assertions of subjectivity must always be approached with suspicion, the championing of immediacy is a pathway to falsehood, not to truth. The appeal to nature in human fate could only be justified were it to also acknowledge the fateful power of that which is not identical with nature.

An immanent criticism of this mythopoetic naturalism is the subject of the latter half of the second chapter. It seeks to show how anarchism’s professedly radical opposition to “authority,” via the cover concept of natural law, ultimately comes to reinforce the asocial ideology of late capitalism. By reducing society’s metabolism with nature into the form of a transcendent moralism, anarchism substitutes a passive imaginary of nature for the active reality of historical mediation. Hence, revolutionary organization, and the social and political determination of nature, cede their necessary assertiveness to a passive and irrational faith in the goodness of nature: through spontaneous revolutionism, we are assured, all will be put right in the end. In place of the divine, anarchism substitutes a worship of the daimonic, imbuing it with a mystified goodness, but the daimonic is not always on the side of the good. This is illustrated via a succinct critique of Bakunin and a more elaborate exposition on Kropotkin. I must caution the reader that this chapter does not seek to present a complete image of anarchism, nor does it seek to deny the differences between certain anarchist traditions, nor does it delve into the legacy of anarcho-syndicalism, for which the nature-concept was a more marginal phenomenon. It is concerned instead with illuminating an *ontological tendency* common to most forms of anarchism, demonstrating via the psychoanalytic concept of passivity the ultimately counterrevolutionary implications of its philosophy.

The Concept of Dialectical Naturalism

Here it seems necessary to clarify the concept of dialectic, including its formulation by Adorno in terms of a “negative dialectic” and by Bookchin in the guise of a “dialectical naturalism.”

Dialectic is indistinguishable from the greatest innovation of Plato—to articulate philosophy in the form of speculative discussion or dialogue, in which questions and one-sided answers lead to inevitable reformulations and digressions. Rather than merely listing an aggregation of “commandments,” “principles,” or “propositions,” as in contemporary analytic philosophy, Plato’s personification of Socrates encourages his interlocutors to rethink and reformulate their unreflected conventions and beliefs by revealing their contradictions. In this spirit, he refers to himself in the *Theaetetus* as barren of original ideas, and as a “midwife” to their own wisdom.³² This notion of the inherent nonidentity between conventional concepts and what they signify is so essential to the process of dialectic that it is preserved all the way up to the young Hegel, whom (particularly in his early essay *The System of Ethical Life*) repeatedly stresses the necessity of “re-cognizing” reality in the spirit of Socratic negativity. A few years later, Hegel expresses this fundamental idea in the following maxim: “What is well-known is well-known, not known.”³³

Hence it should be of little surprise that the logical process of dialectic is closely bound up with the historical concept of what critical theory refers to as *objective* reason. That is to say that by logically educating the rationality of a particular statement or premise, dialectical philosophy furnishes a speculative turn to mind that aims to divest it of traditional prejudices, superstitious nostrums, and parochialisms that do not hold up to the scrutiny of reason. In obliging a participant in dialogue to think out the subject matter immanently, rather than to obey the commandments of authority or unthinking tradition, the very process of dialectic is synchronous with the image of a freethinking and participatory social body that was revived with the radical sansculottes of the French Revolution. The French Revolution was especially redolent in aspects of Hegel’s dialectic, a relation that Herbert Marcuse explicates:

In Hegel’s view, the decisive turn that history took with the French Revolution was that man came to rely on his mind and dared to submit the given reality to the standards of reason. Hegel expounds the new development through a contrast between an employment of reason and an uncritical compliance with the prevailing conditions of life. ‘Nothing is reason that is not the result of thinking.’ Man [sic] has set out to organize reality according to the demands of his free rational thinking instead of simply accommodating his

thoughts to the existing order and the prevailing values. Man is a thinking being. His reason enables him to recognize his own potentialities and those of his world. He is thus not at the mercy of the facts that surround him, but is capable of subjecting them to a higher standard, that of reason. If he follows its lead, he will arrive at certain conceptions that disclose reason to be antagonistic to the existing state of affairs. He may find that history is a constant struggle for freedom, that man's individuality requires that he possess property as the medium of his fulfillment, and that all men have an equal right to develop their human faculties. Actually, however, bondage and inequality prevail; most men have no liberty at all and are deprived of their last scrap of property. Consequently the 'unreasonable' reality has to be altered until it comes into conformity with reason.³⁴

Dialectical philosophy's form and content thereby both presuppose and participate in one another. Dialectical philosophy gives emphasis to the ability of speculative thinking to follow out the rationality of the "what could be" or the "ought" to be, rather than the merely analytical "what is." Crucially, as Hegel would emphasize in the second volume of his *Science of Logic*, this "what could be" is not an abstract property. It refers to a concrete possibility within a particular logic of development.

Dialectical philosophy is also characterized by an emphasis on the "whole," a theme already present in many of Plato's dialogues. For Plato's Socrates, all of the failures of the interlocutors to correctly articulate the substance of justice, or of piety, knowledge, and so forth are all in some way or another failures pertaining to the "one-sidedness" of their conceptions. They are one-sided insofar as their way of thinking has reduced, by way of the concept, the fecundity of social reality into rigid propositions that are contradicted by other equally valid ones. It is therefore the motivic force of contradiction, according to dialectical philosophy, that is the spur of logical development; dialectic lives through and in the contradictions, not by superciliously effacing them. Only through such a procedure could philosophy do justice to historical experience. In Hegel's parlance this is reflected in the notion of "determinate negation," a negation that is in a certain sense progressive for our reason. This essentially "progressive" function of dialectical reason serves a reconstructive purpose in allowing us to reflect upon the unfolding ecological possibilities of history. It is

simultaneously, however, where the dialectic threatens to become most reified through aligning itself with the hegemonic colonization of that history. The latter aligns with the most well-known interpretation of Hegel's infamous *Philosophy of Right*.

In Bookchin's terms, the merit of dialectical philosophy is that it "moves from the undifferentiated abstract to the highly differentiated concrete (while most commonsensical forms of thought move in the opposite direction)."³⁵ Dialectical thinking takes concepts, such as justice or freedom, developing their potentialities under the conditions of both a social and historical mediacy, rather than applying a conceptual abstraction to history *in toto*, as if it were somehow universally valid despite its obvious anachronism.³⁶ Where formalistic philosophers such as Hume, Kant, and Husserl seek to reduce the phenomenology of social life into the assumed primacy of propositional concepts, dialectical philosophy arrives at its truths via the tension between identity and nonidentity, mirrored in the contradiction between the subject's speculative thought and concrete, historical possibility. Hence, as Feuerbach aptly observes in his critique of Hegel, a true dialectic would be that which consists of a genuine dialogue between the two.³⁷

This is the point at which Adorno's concept of a "negative" dialectic begins. In Adorno's formulation, following Kant's distinction between the *constitutum* and *constituens*, a negative dialectic acknowledges the limit of dialectic as "the index of the untruth of identity, of the vanishing of the conceptual into the concept."³⁸ In the same manner that Feuerbach criticized Hegel for remaining distant from a true dialogue between speculative thought and material reality, Adorno illuminates how dialectic has traditionally failed to follow out the logic of its own premises by lapsing into an absolute identity that dissolves all contradiction into itself.³⁹ He seeks to reveal how "identity and contradiction in thinking are welded to one another."⁴⁰ Thus, he states, "the totality of the contradiction is nothing other than the untruth of the total identification, as it is manifested in the latter."⁴¹ This leads to his definitive statement:

Philosophy has, at this historical moment, its true interest in what Hegel, in accordance with tradition, proclaimed his disinterest: in the non-conceptual, the individual and the particular; in what, ever since Plato, has been dismissed as transient and inconsequential and which Hegel stamped with the label of lazy existence. Its theme would be the qualities

which it has degraded to the merely contingent, to *quantité négligeable* [negligible quantity]. What is urgent for the concept is what it does not encompass, what its abstraction-mechanism eliminates, what is not already an exemplar of the concept.⁴²

The force of a negative dialectic, which aims to encompass that which resides outside the cover concept of nature, serves as a constant corrective to the reified concepts illuminated in the first two chapters of this study. The final chapter seeks to reconstruct the sensibility of a dialectical naturalism, by uncovering the residues of ecological and social possibility that reified consciousness passes over. Specifically, Bookchin's "dialectical naturalism"—although by no means consistent with Adorno's philosophy in Bookchin's own appraisal of it—yields a dialectic that is arguably "negative" in Adorno's sense. It aims at an elucidation of the social potentialities glossed over by the World-Spirit, and yet present to us still, in a time of global ecological crisis. To attempt such an elucidation is to try to name that which is not permitted to speak in the predominant nature-concept of our historical period. What a dialectical naturalism seeks to accomplish is to give voice to those nonconceptual remnants of past history—in Bookchin's parlance, the unrealized possibilities of history's "turning points"—that could have yielded radical alternatives and could productively inform any future struggles for a truly ecological society.

In reconstructing a dialectical naturalism and presenting its philosophical beginning-point as one of negative dialectic, the final chapter draws on three fragmentary models that preceded the development of Bookchin's theory. Out of these models it is Ernst Bloch above all who reveals the immanently utopian aspects of these nonconceptual residues. Bloch characterizes dialectical thinking in terms redolent of Bookchin's later image of "social ecology":

Thinking means venturing beyond. But in such a way that what already exists is not kept under or skated over. Not in its deprivation, let alone in moving out of it. Not in the causes of deprivation, let alone in the first signs of the change which is ripening within it. That is why real venturing beyond never goes into the mere vacuum of an In-Front-of-Us, merely fanatically, merely visualizing abstractions. Instead, it grasps the New as something that is mediated in what exists and is in motion, although to be revealed the New demands the