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Book Review: Martha Lee, Earth First!

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**Martha Lee, *Earth First! : Environmental Apocalypse* . New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995. 208 pp. Paper.**

Martha Lee's book is the first in a new series of books on Religion and Politics sponsored by Syracuse University Press. This series focuses on contemporary religious movements and their involvement in politics, analysing them primarily in terms of whether they are fundamentalist or liberal, apocalyptic or millenarian. Lee is a political scientist and author of *The Nation of Islam: An American Millenarian Movement*.

In comparing her new book *Earth First!* with Susan Zakin's *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement* (Viking Press, 1993), Lee claims that Zakin's book lacks objectivity: it is journalistic, unsystematic and anecdotal, and Zakin is sympathetic to the movement, and is a friend of Dave Foreman. Further, it fails to focus on Deep Ecology, which Lee claims has been the basic philosophy of the Earth First! movement (pp. 12-14). Lee's book makes an important contribution in that it is undoubtedly more objective than Zakin's in its systematic accounting of the facts surrounding the development and activities of Earth First! Further, it is based on interviews and a careful analysis of first, the informal newsletter and then the *Earth First! Journal* since the movement's beginnings in 1980.

But by analysing Earth First! primarily through political categories, and as essentially a religious/political phenomenon, coupled with the political conceptual framework Lee uses to interpret Earth First! (millenarianism and apocalypticism) the overall objectivity of her scholarship is called into question. For instance, she says that "our relationship with this planet is critical to our political identity" and that "for Earth First!ers, ultimate political meaning is found in the wilderness" (p ix) - these kinds of statements strain the usefulness of political categories and analysis past the breaking point by attempting to evaluate and discuss basic philosophical ideas and concepts from a political perspective. Further, like most modern political scientists, she exhibits a built-in anthropocentric bias which suggests that she does not really understand what ecocentrism is all about. She says, for example, that "It is the well being of this planet that most fundamentally supports human life; threats to the health of the earth are there-

fore threats to human life itself. It is the power of that connection that drives environmentalism" (p. xi). This tends to bias her against the Foreman eco-centric faction, and in favour of the Roselle/Bari faction - which moved Earth First! in a social justice direction in the late 80's.

Lee's use of the categories "millenarianism and apocalypticism" to describe Earth First! (and its two contending factions) is heavy-handed and overbearing to the point of irritation throughout the text. While these interpretative categories occasionally produce interesting insights, more often they result in bizarre distortions (to fit these categories) *non sequiturs*, and gross oversimplifications. She goes so far as to say that "in all its forms, environmentalism is - at least marginally - apocalyptic" (p. ix). Lee also claims that "both [Earth First!]'s apocalyptic and its millenarian belief systems developed from the fertile ground of deep ecology" (p. 19). One would like to see that assertion substantiated in some detail.

Martha Lee explains that the political scientists who developed these categories regard religious apocalyptic movements (and here she lumps Earth First! together with fundamentalist groups such as Islam) as inherently pathological to various degrees (p. 23). Given that the analysis of the ecological crisis by the Foreman faction of Earth First!, as described by Lee (pp. 41-2, 59) essentially parallels the analyses now arrived at by most National Academies of Sciences throughout the world, and by the 1992 World Scientist's Warning to Humanity, perhaps an upcoming book in the Syracuse University Press's Religion and Politics series will document the apocalyptic (and therefore pathological) nature of the world scientist's professional organizations.

Lee is adamant that Deep Ecology has been the philosophy of Earth First! although she admits that most EF!ers read very little Deep Ecology philosophy, and that specific mention of Deep Ecology did not appear in the *E.F! Journal* until mid-1984 (pp.18, 37, 57). It is rather painful to read about some of the positions taken by the Foreman faction in the *E.F! Journal*: for example, Foreman arguing that even a nuclear war would not be that damaging to the Earth and would hasten the end of industrial society, his remark that "wilderness is the real world" (it's all real! - it's just that the rest has to be restored and reinhabited) and his remarks elsewhere that we should "allow Ethiopians to starve"; Christopher Manes suggesting that one solution to overpopulation would be to dismantle the medical technology designed to save lives, and of AIDS as Nature's solution to overpopulation; and Reed Noss writing of genetic "deep ecology elite" as a "chosen people" out to save the Earth (pp. 64, 68, 83-84, 92-3,101-3). [Paul Shepard and E.O. Wilson have claimed that all humans have the "wilderness gene" but that it is suppressed, especially in modern urban people.] Since many, but not all, of these articles appeared under various pseudonyms, this leads to speculation as to whether Foreman, Manes, and the others were merely exercising their rights as individuals to the free expression of radical and shocking (and perhaps misanthropic) ideas; whether these ideas were meant

to express the philosophy of Earth First!; and/or whether they thought they were expounding ideas which were the natural outcome of Deep Ecology philosophy. If the latter, they were radically mistaken in their understanding of Deep Ecology philosophy as espoused by Naess and other Deep Ecology movement theorists.

Lee accurately points out that Edward Abbey's ideas, expressed mainly through his novels (and his association with Earth First!) "had inspired the founding of the movement" (p. 126). Given that "since Earth First!'s inception, Dave Foreman had served as its prophet and leader" (p. 105) together with Foreman's idolizing of Abbey, the predominant philosophy and ideology of Earth First! throughout the 1980's is probably best described, not as Deep Ecology, but rather as an idiosyncratic, somewhat misanthropic Abbey/Foreman version of ecocentrism, coupled with a monkey wrenching/"rednecks for wilderness" image that some people found offensive.

The Foreman/Earth First! phenomenon is best understood, not by strained and forced comparisons with fundamentalist apocalyptic groups (such as in some forms of Islam) but rather by the role it played in the ongoing saga of the development of the American conservation/environmental movement throughout the late-19th and 20th centuries. This is perhaps best described in Stephen Fox's *John Muir and his Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Little, Brown, 1981). Fox's key conceptual tool for describing the dynamics of this drama is the "radical amateur tradition" which, he claims, has been "the driving force in conservation history." In contrast with the bureaucratic environmental professionals and government agencies, the "radical amateurs," Fox argues, "provided high standards, independence, integrity," served as "the movement's conscience," and revitalized the movement over and over again, while helping to keep its priorities straight, and "on task." (p. 333).

Viewed from the perspective of Fox's analysis, there is a striking continuity in the "radical amateur" conservationist tradition extending, in its main phase, from John Muir, through Dave Brower, to Dave Foreman. Muir was the great ecocentric/pantheist prophet of the 19th century calling for protection of the wild world and the ecological integrity of the Earth. After Muir's death, the Sierra Club regressed basically into a low-profile anthropocentric elitist hiking club concerned with protecting wilderness for its aesthetic and recreational values. However, in the 1950's, Dave Brower (referred to as "Muir reincarnate" by Fox) and other young energetic leaders in the Sierra Club revitalized the Club, reviving Muir's crusading spirit, and resurrecting the ecocentric rationale for curbing population growth and endless economic development, and the protection of wilderness and ecological integrity. After Brower was fired as executive director of the Club in 1969, and the hullabaloo of Earthday 1970 had died down, environmental professionals assumed control of the major environmental organizations (including Sierra Club) developing bureaucracies and tactics which paralleled the professionalised environmental bureaucracies in govern-

ment. This new post-Earthday environmental establishment was powerful and financially well-heeled, but became increasingly anthropocentric, pragmatic, focused on urban pollution issues, politically-oriented, and compromising in its philosophy, tactics, and goals throughout the 1970's and 80's. In reaction to the compromising over protection of the wild, Dave Foreman and Earth First! again assumed Brower's role as "radical amateur" to reassert, in dramatic and controversial new ways, the Muir/Leopold/Brower ecocentric approach to environmentalism, again revitalizing a demoralized environmental movement during the anti-ecological Reagan era, reasserting the priorities of global population stabilization and the protection of wilderness and ecological integrity, and calling for an end to the political compromising by the environmental professionals. (Overall, Zakin's book does a better job of illustrating this continuity than does Lee's, which tends to treat Earth First! almost as if it were an isolated phenomenon.)

By 1990, Earth First! underwent a major upheaval, as Martha Lee points out, with Dave Foreman resigning (he was involved with the FBI investigation at this point) and the Roselle/Bari faction (with its "emphasis on social justice") taking over the organization. As Lee puts it, "The social justice faction thus established itself as the new Earth First!" (p. 145). In a guarded way, Lee seems to endorse this shift as a more humane expression of the movement which resulted in a new and better Earth First! The tacit assumption she seems to make here is - if a movement is not explicitly concerned with social justice concerns, then it is misanthropic. But such an assumption is obviously a *non sequitur*. Doubtless there were excesses with the Foreman faction, but movements and organizations can, and should have, differing goals and, by spreading themselves too thin, movements can overextend themselves and dilute their effectiveness, or one main goal (social justice) can come to dominate and overshadow another main goal (the protection of ecological integrity). The original purposes and goals of Earth First! were spelled out explicitly from the beginning, and Foreman reiterated them over and over in the *E.F! Journal*. Kris Sommerville of the Foreman faction saw the split between the factions as a "basic philosophical disagreement within the Earth First! movement (biocentrism, i.e. wilderness vs. anthropocentrism, i.e. social justice)" (p. 140). Foreman claims that "What I see happening now to the Earth First! movement is what happened to the Greens in West Germany - a concerted effort to transform an ecological group into a leftist group" (Dave Foreman, "Whither Earth First!?" in Foreman, *Confessions of an Ecowarrior*, Harmony Books, 1991, pp. 213-20).

The intuitions of Muir, Brower, and Foreman concerning giving the highest environmental priority to the protection of wilderness (in terms of protecting the Earth's ecological integrity and species habitat, and trying to save what was left of the wild world by calling for halt to further growth and development) have now been confirmed by the world's leading ecologists and conservation biologists. For example, Anne and Paul Ehrlich recently remarked that, "the ravaging of biodiversity ... is the most serious single environmental peril facing civiliza-

tion" (Anne and Paul Ehrlich, *Healing the Planet: Strategies for Resolving the Environmental Crisis*, Addison Wesley, 1991, pp. 35-7). Martha Lee describes how Foreman went on to establish, with John David, the *Wild Earth* journal and (in line with the original goals of Earth First! - and, for that matter, the Muir/Brower Sierra Club) how he has collaborated with conservation biologists to develop the Wildlands Project and the North American Wilderness Recovery project (pp. 143, 145-6). Maybe, in the environmental 11th hour, the winds of change are blowing again - it is not without significance that Anne Ehrlich, Brower, and Foreman have all recently been elected to serve on the Sierra Club's national Board of Directors, the Club has just voted to ban all old growth cutting in the National Forests, and has appointed a 23-year-old president who idolizes Brower.

The schism between the Foreman ecological faction and the Roselle social justice faction that tore Earth First! apart is part of larger anthropocentric/ecocentric conflicts that have existed throughout the history of American environmentalism. During the 1960's, as Stephen Fox has pointed out, "newer man-centred leaders" arose in the environmental ranks, such as the socialist/biologist Barry Commoner and Ralph Nader, who saw industrial pollution as the essence of the environmental problem, while viewing wildlife and wilderness protection with disdain. By Earthday 1970, the environmental movement had essentially split into an anthropocentric urban pollution wing, led by Commoner, Nader, and Murray Bookchin, and an ecocentric wing concerned primarily with human overpopulation and protection of wilderness and the Earth's ecological integrity, centred around Brower, Paul Ehrlich, and most professional ecologists (see *John Muir and His Legacy*, ch. 9).

The newest ingredient in this mix has been the explicit coupling of social justice concerns with the urban pollution wing, especially over the last decade, promoted primarily by EcoMarxists, Ecosocialists, postmodern deconstructionists, and others with a Leftist political background. For example, new histories and reinterpretations of the environmental movement have appeared by Robert Gottlieb (*Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, Island Press, 1993) and Mark Dowie (*Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, MIT Press, 1995). Gottlieb and Dowie usefully critique the professionalism and compromising of the major environmental organizations (the Group of 10) throughout the 1970's and 80's, but they also propose that environmentalism should shift its priorities from the protection of the Earth's biodiversity and ecological integrity to an urban pollution/social justice agenda (referred to now as the movement for "environmental justice".) Dowie applauds the "shift in emphasis from the natural to the urban domain [that] has transformed American environmentalism ... The central concern of the new movement is human health. Its adherents consider wilderness preservation a ... worthy but overemphasized value" (pp. 126-7). Dowie considers Gottlieb's *Forcing the Spring* to be a "landmark revisionist history of environmentalism" which chronicles and supports this shift

to urban pollution/social justice concerns (p. 21). Dowie proposes that people of color, exemplified by the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (whose primary interests to this point have been equity issues involving toxic waste sitings in urban areas) should be the leaders of what he calls a new "fourth wave" environmentalism (pp. 151-55, 251-63).

To provide further support for (and to ignite feelings of moral indignation in favour of) his "environmental justice" position, Dowie reinterprets the history of conservation through the lens of an anthropocentric social class/gender/ethnic analysis. He claims that the conservation movement historically has been a "special interest" lobby: a racist "white man's club" out to "protect the sources of their aesthetic pleasure..." (pp. 2-3, 30). Similarly, Gottlieb provides a stereotypical account of the Sierra Club conservation fights under Brower, during the 1950's and 60's, as efforts to protect wilderness as aesthetic and recreational resources for an elite minority (pp. 41-46).

Charges of racism and elitism made against the traditional American conservation movement throughout its history have some validity, but, for the most part, among various hunting groups and birders in the early 20th century (see Fox, pp. 345-51); they essentially do not apply to the ecocentric environmental motivations of Muir, Leopold, et. al., nor to the Sierra Club under Brower. Such charges, made by Dowie and others, tend to function as a "red herring": deflecting attention away from the real environmental issues and the seriousness of the contemporary global ecological crisis.

A key document (largely ignored by environmental historians) that establishes the basic irrelevance of the racist/elitist charges - by recounting the radical ecocentric change in the Sierra Club from an anthropocentric recreational/aesthetic to an ecological approach to wilderness protection - is Michael P. Cohen's *The History of the Sierra Club 1892-1970* (Sierra Club Books, 1988). As Cohen points out, Brower claims he changed his philosophical perspective from a recreational to an ecological approach to protecting wilderness after receiving a copy of Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* from long-time Sierra Club leader Harold Bradley in 1950 (pp. 116-17).

The Sierra Club Wilderness conferences, begun in 1949, soon led to discussions of wilderness philosophy, with Sierra Club leaders Brower and Richard Leonard, Park Service biologist Lowell Sumner, and Wilderness Society president Howard Zahniser coming down on the side of biocentrism (or ecocentrism); in so doing, they believed they were following the philosophies of Muir and Leopold. At the 1957 Wilderness conference, Sumner and biologist A. Starker Leopold argued for protecting wilderness on ecological grounds. Brower published these proceedings in the 1957 annual *Sierra Club Bulletin* thereby, Cohen suggests, using these ecological arguments to influence Club policy (pp. 124-33, 214-17). (In its popular writings and arguments the Club, during the 1950's and 60's, like Muir, still argued primarily on recreational/aesthetic grounds for wilderness to appeal to an anthropocentric public. For similar reasons, the Wilderness Ac-

t of 1964 was framed by Zahniser as an anthropocentric document, although Zahniser was an ecocentrist.) At the 1959 Wilderness conference, the biologists Raymond Cowles and Starker Leopold tied wilderness concerns to the human overpopulation problem (again on ecological grounds); the Club adopted a population policy in 1965 (pp. 232-33, 369, 414, 436-7). Brower wrote the foreword to Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968 (p. 414).

Although popular consensus among environmental historians locates the beginnings of modern environmentalism with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, Carson's book is notable primarily for dramatically focusing widespread public attention on environmental problems. Michael McCloskey (Brower's successor as the Club's executive director in 1969) points out, rightly in my estimation, that the wilderness movement of the 1950's marks the beginning of the modern environmental movement. The environmentalism of the post-World War II Ecological Revolution, and the clarification of its ecocentric philosophy, according to McCloskey, began with the mid 1950's Sierra Club Wilderness Conferences, and continued in the crusading activism of the Sierra Club of the 1950's and 60's under Brower's leadership (Cohen, pp. 133-4).

In order to bring about an effective reconciliation between ecological and social justice concerns (what J. Baird Callicott refers to as the "Marx means Muir" issue) Arne Naess refers to the "three great grass-roots movements" (the ecology movement, the social justice movement, and the peace movement) that have come together, in the latter half of the twentieth century, to form the international Green movement for social change. However, it promotes confusion, he claims, to identify the Green movement (and its other component movements) with the ecology movement. The Deep Ecology Movement strongly supports sustainability for all societies, but sustainability in the ecologically "wide" sense of protecting "the full richness and diversity of life forms on the planet." Naess agrees that societies will not have reached full sustainability until significant progress has been made toward attaining all the goals of the Green movement, nevertheless a very high priority must be placed on ecological issues. While Naess and other environmentalists and supporters of the Deep Ecology Movement are very concerned with issues of peace and social justice, Naess nevertheless claims that "considering the accelerating rate of ecological destruction worldwide, I find it acceptable to continue fighting for *ecological* sustainability whatever the state of affairs may be concerning the other two goals of Green societies." Supporters of the Deep Ecology Movement, Naess claims, "should concentrate on specific issues relating to the *ecological* crisis (including their social and political consequences)" (for Naess's comments, see George Sessions (ed.) *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Shambhala, 1995, pp. 267, 413-14, 445-53).

Based on Naess's analysis of the relationship between the ecology and social justice movements, it is obvious that the Foreman faction of Earth First! was on the right track, and no useful purpose was served by broadening and changing



the focus of the organization to include social justice concerns. Organizations that have been historically devoted specifically to ecological issues, such as the Sierra Club, should retain that focus. For those proposing that the environmental/ecological movement should change its priorities from ecological to urban pollution/social justice issues ("environmental justice") it would seem incumbent upon them to show that the global ecological crisis is much less serious than the world's scientists' organizations are now claiming. This may, indeed, turn out to be a rather tall order.

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