

Paul Shepard's Deep Ecology

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Paul Shepard's "Radical Politics" was probably written in 1995. Extremely short and intensely elliptical, interpretative liberties are presupposed. The simple fact, as those who know his work will recognize, is that the themes he touches on in "Radical Politics" are extensively developed elsewhere in his books and papers. My concern is that I will not do justice to "Radical Politics," and to Shepard's larger intellectual project. Although few know the breadth and depth of his work,¹ anyone with deep ecological inclinations will find a rich vein of relevant thought. Shepard wrote that "Claude Lévi-Strauss rescued the savage mind."² He rescues prehistory, and with it our consciousness of and affinity with the natural world in all its complexity, beauty and fragility. And yet that statement does not do justice to his stunningly original, intellectually provocative, and vitally important thought.

So framed, I choose to interpret "Radical Politics" set within his lifetime "body of work" and the larger contexts of natural and cultural evolution. There are various interpretations of Shepard's body of work, especially those that highlight his interest in hunter-gatherers and the implications of prehistory for the present. This thematic is front and center in his essay, "A Post-Historic Primitivism," and in many other of his works. I'll return to Shepard's notion of post-historic primitivism in the concluding section. Clearly, "Radical Politics" can be set for the purposes of interpretation within the frame of so-called primitivism.

But Shepard's thinking also has deep roots in Darwin and evolution. Darwin, of course, virtually sneered at the indigenous people of South America, most obviously as the Beagle rounded Tierra del Fuego. Essentially he viewed the indigenes as living in savagery, bereft of the benefits, even salvation, of civilization. The idea did not occur to Darwin that those "savages" were in fact living evidence of the evolutionary origins of the human species. Why? Because

¹ Although Shepard may be unfamiliar to younger generations of deep ecologists, his work has been widely recognized as seminal. For example, Barry Lopez wrote, "Much of what we value in contemporary thought about 'nature and culture' grew up in the seedbed of Paul Shepard's thinking. He writes with freshness and an almost angry brilliance, as though he had grasped the psychological need for natural ecosystems at the same moment they were disappearing from an industrial world." Peter Matthiessen called him "An exceptionally clear thinker who is also a lucid and exhilarating writer....His work is valuable but very urgent, shining in the sun like the tip of a vast iceberg of knowledge and reflection that supports it." Quoted in William Severini Kowinski and Florence Shepard, Introduction to Paul Howe Shepard 1925–1996, accessed 15 December 2015, <https://paulhoweshepard.wordpress.com/>. For introductions to Shepard's thought, see also: Max Oelschlaeger, ed., *The Company of Others: Essays in Celebration of Paul Shepard* (Durango, CO: Kivaki Press, 1995) and Paul Shepard, ed., *The Only World We've Got* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996).

² Paul Shepard, "A Post-Historic Primitivism," in *The Wilderness Condition: Essays on Environment and Civilization*, ed. Max Oelschlaeger (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992), 51.

Darwin, as with the overwhelming majority of humans living within the cocoon of civilization, then and now, was oblivious to prehistory. So framed— without prehistory—*The Descent of Man* is like a pea without a pod or a hammer without an anvil.³

Try thinking of Paul Shepard as a twentieth-century evolutionary thinker who, much as Thomas Huxley did in the nineteenth century, found “granitic truth” in evolution.⁴ But unlike Darwin, Shepard understood more fully the natural roots of our humanity, still embedded in nature, including the development of human intelligence, a thesis argued at length in *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*.⁵

The so-called primitives of the modern world are not, through Shepard’s lens, savages bereft of the benefits of civilization, but phenotypical exemplars of a human genotype developed over millions of years of mammalian history, culminating in the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. The lessons for us that are found in these exemplars are, on Shepard’s account, legion. Most importantly, however, they essentially constitute the living proof of the ongoing importance of relationships with the natural world in all its diversity and variety.

“Radical Politics” can thus be read as offering a vigorous exposition and defense of the implications of evolution and the vital importance of prehistory against the imprecations and misdeeds of humanists, political liberals and conservatives, and environmentalists. It’s not the case that Shepard believes these groups are intrinsically ignorant. Rather they are caught up in a cultural cocoon of ideas that (i) blinds them to the reality that whatever humankind’s many cultural achievements, humans are *naturally evolved social primates*, and, (ii) obscures the continuing intellectual and psycho-social importance of the natural world to the human endeavor. On Shepard’s account, this obliviousness to prehistory permeates the academy, and perpetuates itself in both the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. One consequence, among many, is that environmentalism itself is relegated to long term self-defeat. Terse hints of these notions can be found throughout the paper. But the intellectual motor, so to speak, that drives these notions lie in his larger body of work. Let me offer a few examples.

Humanism itself is a cornerstone of the modern university and environmentalism. The fundamental premise is that “man makes himself,” as generation after generation of university

³ That is a long story, beyond the interpretive scope of this paper. Think of my assertion as an invitation to read Shepard’s many books.

⁴ Huxley was known as Darwin’s bulldog for his timely defense of the evolutionary theory against the imprecations of religionists. “Granitic truth” is, of course, a phrase from Thoreau.

⁵ Paul Shepard, *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence* (New York: Viking Press, 1978).

students have been taught.⁶ Thus, as self-creating beings who've risen up and triumphed over their animal nature, so too humans must impose a cultural order upon nature through economic policy that appropriates an intrinsically worthless natural world into the goods and services that sustain civilization. On this account, environmental policy is nothing more than an afterthought that protects human interests against the unintended consequences of economic development.

Shepard argues against the ideological implications of humanism in his books, such as *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* and *Thinking Animals*, and in a wide array of papers. First and foremost in his alternative to humanism is the premise that humankind, fashioned in the longeurs of evolutionary space and time, has a "first nature" (my term, not his) cemented in the human genome and manifest throughout the range of human behaviour, whatever the cultural intrusions (our "second nature") or overlays. Shepard writes in "Radical Politics" that "Intellectually we are engaged in planet-wide devastation of ecosystems." Of course! Humankind has been seduced and symbolically compelled (culturally over-determined) by the notion that the world, the things in the world, and the relationships among the things in the world are nothing more than human constructs.⁷ The idea that the world has an evolved and evolving natural structure created over hundreds of millions of years—atmospheric, oceanic, biological, ecological—has no traction within the modernist worldview of humanism.

Likewise, the notion that we ourselves have an evolved first nature that is largely frustrated, stultified, or even perverted inside the cocoon of post-agricultural cultures animates Shepard's thinking. He observes in "Radical Politics" that he has learned through life as a university teacher that humans have lost sight of our first nature and seek "the Way"—the answer to all problems—"by looking into mirrors."⁸ The ideas that, for example, the imagination of a child is best developed in an ecologically complex and biologically diverse surround, or that "the diversity of natural communities...is our key to human tolerance...and our psychic model for strictly human peace," are on Shepard's account possible only when we turn our gaze from the mirror towards the other—the natural world in all its complexity and our own prehistory.⁹ "Failing to enact prehistory," he writes, "we can only live in history, caught between captivity

⁶ A prime example is V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London: Watts & Co., 1936). Ironically, Childe is usually thought of as a prehistorian.

⁷ Cf. Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and Brain* (New York: Norton, 1998) on the power of symbolic compulsion.

⁸ Paul Shepard, "Radical Politics," *The Trumpeter* 31, no. 2 (2015): 91.

⁹ Shepard, *Thinking Animals*, 259. See also Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 1977) and <https://evelintamm.wordpress.com/2013/05/12/edith-cobb-the-ecology-of-imagination-in-childhood/> for a brief account of Cobb's work.

and escape, afflicted with Henry Thoreau's 'life of quiet desperation,' now called neurosis."¹⁰

Similarly, as with humanism, "Radical Politics" offers evolutionarily grounded hints of his critiques of liberalism and conservatism.¹¹ The deeper story is that whatever the causes, the advent of agri-cultures inevitably led to the rise of classes, especially political and administrative classes charged with the operation of nation states, and eventually to political ideologies such as liberalism and conservatism that, whatever their differences, are blind to the natural world. The matrix of agri-culture has "marginalized" nature on Shepard's account, such that "the Others [are regarded as] mere stuff by the Right; [and as] simulations in pets, kindness, and biologically meaningless crusades by the Left."¹² Even worse, in the main, the political, administrative, and scientific intelligentsia of the modern state absolutely believe that imposing the artifice of human constraint on an unruly environment is the future—a project widely known as sustainable development (and, alternatively, as managing planet earth).

Conjecturally, the ideological paradigm set in motion by the 1991 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was in Shepard's mind as he began writing "Radical Politics." The dominant discourse then—and now, for that matter, despite deep ecological critiques—was all about bending an intransigent environment to the human purposes of supplying destitute Third World people the resources necessary to escape poverty while maintaining present First World standards of living without imposing limits to future economic growth.

To take one example of the dominant paradigm, in the run-up to UNCED, the September 1989 issue of *Scientific American* trumpeted the title "Managing Planet Earth" on the cover, with the lead article of that name written by Harvard professor William C. Clark. While the issue has some scientifically "pure" essays (i.e., devoid of the ideological framework that humans are in control of the planet, and that nature must be bent to human purpose), such as E. O. Wilson's "Threats to Biodiversity," Clark's essay is rife with the "arrogance of humanism."¹³ The notion that natural beings and habitats have intrinsic value, value beyond economic purposes, to Clark's ilk, unthinkable, as such a notion lies outside the modern paradigm of humanism. Gro Harlem Brundtland, who oversaw UNCED, pushes such arrogance to the most illogical extreme, arguing that even the second law of thermodynamics (the so-called entropy law) poses no limits to economic growth.¹⁴ As Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and his successors (ecological

¹⁰ Shepard, "Post-Historic Primitivism," 46.

¹¹ These two terms were semantically less fractured in 1995 than today.

¹² Shepard, "Radical Politics," 92.

¹³ See David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ See Gro Harlem Brundtland, "How to Secure Our Common Future," *Scientific American* 261, no. 3 (1989): 190.

economists) make clear, such a notion is patently, unequivocally false.¹⁵

The failures of the sustainable development and the managing planet earth ideologies are readily apparent at local, regional, continental, and global scales.¹⁶ For example, Nancy Langston's *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares* is a detailed exposition of more than one hundred years of forest management in the inland West (USA). Long story short: the US Forest Service was (and is) essentially an ecologically clueless, economically obsessed, and politically driven institution that over the course of one hundred years "led to a series of unexpected effects and unintended consequences.... A kind of arrogance made it increasingly difficult for forest managers...to pay attention to signs that things were going wrong."¹⁷ Dean Bavington's *Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Cod Collapse* likewise identifies managerial arrogance as the key variable driving the collapse of the cod fishery.¹⁸

The ideas that grasping the geologically, biologically, and ecologically evolved realities of the Earth (construed locally, regionally, nationally, or globally) and subsequently modifying human behaviour to complement and harmonize with those realities eludes—to this day—the liberal and conservative mindsets. As Shepard recognized more than four decades ago, the collapse of complex societies with roots in agriculture is, unfortunately, nearly a foregone outcome.¹⁹ The machine of shallow ecology grinds on and on while, as numerous practitioners of the subversive science have pointed out, the most salient measures of planetary health have worsened.

However brief and incomplete my reading of "Radical Politics" to this juncture, let me turn to what might be considered "the takeaway." In the concluding paragraph of "Radical Politics" Shepard writes: "Perhaps hope lies in going back over our human history to our beginnings to

¹⁵ See Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁶ Although the United Nations has kept a stiff upper lip and has not rejected the inherent lunacy of the idea that humankind is in control of the natural world, the UN has acknowledged some of the problems in the sustainable development project. See *Review of implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles* (United Nations 2012) accessed January 16, 2016, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/641Synthesis_report_Web.pdf.

¹⁷ Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), 296.

¹⁸ Dean Bavington, *Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Cod Collapse* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

¹⁹ See Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) for a compelling account of the vulnerability of complex societies, such as the industrial-consumer societies of the First World, to collapse. See also A.W. Johnson and T. Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State* (Stanford: University Press, 1987) for a detailed account of how the evolution of complexity was inevitable once agrarian sedentism was established.

refashion new approaches to living on the earth that conform to how the world was made.”²⁰ Indeed! Obviously, that statement chimes with Shepard’s life work. But when I first read that sentence the thought immediately jumped into mind that, even though Shepard did not self-identify as a “deep ecologist” (if for no other reason than criteria for such self-identification do not exist²¹), an apt title for this piece could well be “Deep Ecology as Radical Politics.” At least three reasons support that notion.

First, keenly observing the obvious, a deeply ecological political practice starts with the realization that liberalism and conservatism are ecologically bankrupt, mired in anthropocentrism and the hubris of managerial arrogance. A deep ecological approach, to steal a phrase, might begin by asking, “What does nature tell us?” and proceed accordingly. One of America’s foremost climatologists, Dr. John Firor, argues that what nature tells us is that in our industrial hubris we have developed a defining notion of humankind that is essentially Cartesian, that is, the belief that we are the master and possessor of nature. To the contrary, Firor argues, meaningful change in policy requires “the development of a widely held, alternative definition of what it means to be human on earth.”²² Precisely!

And that is exactly what Shepard delivers on. On his account, prehistory teaches us that we are not a species apart from, above, and in control of the natural environs in which we evolved, but an embedded species that is a part of the natural world. As I read Shepard, mainstream environmentalism is fated to fail for many reasons, not the least of which is that the natural world—the flora, fauna, habitats, atmosphere and waters, and ecological and geological processes—is viewed as acted upon rather than as originative and relational. “What the industrial magnates and their [shallow ecologist] minions never understood,” he writes, “was that the spirit of the environmental movement was concern for the brotherhood of life. They saw it instead as pollution, an ‘energy crisis,’ poor techniques. Dirty air and water, and the poisoning of the environment by wastes and fertilizers and pesticides, pre-empted for them, its real meaning. Political, economic, and ideological attention to the environment as an issue made pollution its cause, for that could be dealt with by the existing system.”²³

Second, as Shepard implies in “Radical Politics,” the politics of today are anything but radical. Any number of political scientists have made the argument in detail. For example, the political time cycle in the United States, the nation with the world’s largest ecological footprint, runs on

²⁰ Shepard, “Radical Politics,” 93.

²¹ Naess and Sessions’ Deep Ecology Platform offers eight criteria that might serve. However, Naess does not believe that the platform offers a definition of deep ecology. See Arne Naess, “The ‘Eight Points’ Revisited,” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambala, 1995), 214.

²² John Firor, *Our Changing Atmosphere: A Global Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 125.

²³ Shepard, *Thinking Animals*, 243.

a schedule of four, plus or minus two years. Nearest to the heart of all politicians is election and then re-election. Thus formulating policies that address issues extending decades, centuries, or even millennia, do not figure into electoral calculations. Likewise, voters themselves are attuned to the short-term electoral cycle. Clearly, then, time is out of joint: the natural world does not run on a temporal schedule of four, plus or minus two years.²⁴

Temporality aside, a politics grounded in the deep ecological consciousness of post-historic primitivism would, as I read Shepard, stop dealing with the symptoms of various environmental crises, and go to the underlying core causes. If “man makes himself,” and if humankind is apart from the Earth, then essentially humankind has carte blanche to appropriate and use Earth. The atmosphere becomes nothing more than a sink for the disposal of the byproducts of the petrochemical and energy empires. The fresh waters of the world become nothing more than drinking water for a relentlessly expanding human population. Animals become nothing more than meat and hides.

No doubt, a post-historic, radical politics would subvert the existing system. Shepard’s thinking ranges from the radical proposal in *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, which would restore much of the North American continent to genuine wildness, to a smaller but no less radical vision where humans once again “mind animals.” While I regret to say that the larger proposal is untenable, the latter vision has genuine potential to alter conceptual fundamentals and perceptual consciousness. The best example of such change that I am familiar with is Freeman House’s *Totem Salmon*, truly an inspiring narrative. House concludes his narrative by beginning with Levi-Strauss’s notion that

“In a world where diversity exceeds our mental capacity nothing is impossible in our capacity to become human.” If this claim is true, then the obverse corollary it presumes must also be true—that is, natural diversity becomes simplified to the point that we can realize the deluded modern ambition to “managing” it from a distance, our capacities to become human will also be severely diminished. As we engage directly the recovery of our shared habitats, we find ourselves in the embrace of the expansive community that offers the best hope of realizing ourselves as fully human. There is no separate life.²⁵

Third, and finally, Shepard became one of the leading voices in what was then a nascent environmental movement in a book that became a standard text for introductory environmental studies classes across the nation: *The Subversive Science: Essays Towards an*

²⁴ See, among many, R. J. Johnston, *Nature, State and Economy: A Political Economy of the Environment* (New York: Wiley, 1996), Robert C. Paehlke, *Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics*, and Robert C. Paehlke and Douglas Torgerson, *Managing Leviathan: Environmental Politics and the Administrative State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2nd ed, 2005).

²⁵ Freeman House, *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 217-218.

Ecology of Man (1969).²⁶ The intellectual tenor of that book can be caught in a single sentence: “The ideological status of ecology is that of a resistance movement.”²⁷ That notion essentially nails the status of deep ecology, either in a narrow sense as limited to the ecophilosophical aspects of environmental policy, or in a larger, more Naess-like sense of including peace and social justice issues. As George Sessions argues, Shepard is truly one of the intellectual progenitors of deep ecology today, an “ecological elder” to use Sessions’ term.

²⁶ Still in graduate school, I somehow missed this publication, and remained unaware of the gravitas of Shepard’s thinking until George Sessions alerted me.

²⁷ Paul Shepard, “Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint,” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, 139.