

Why I Am a Misanthrope

Christopher Manes

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If there has been one, wearisome leitmotif among the peevish critics of Earth First! over the past decade, it is the reproach that radical environmentalism is a misanthropic, antihuman, insensitive enterprise. Industry apologists lugubriously deplore how EF! wilderness proposals will cost people jobs and impede the glorious march of economic progress. A perplexed Murray Bookchin, philosopher and unintelligible grouch, frets over the fact that eco-radicals worry about "lower life forms" when the obvious apex of evolution, Murray Bookchin, has the right and duty to renovate nature according to his liking. In a recent article in *Outside*, Alston Chase, nothing if not consistent, demonstrated once again his well-honed ignorance of the environmental movement by claiming Earth First!'s biocentrism has alienated activists. And now, alas, even some among the ranks of Earth First! are unhappy with radical environmentalism's misanthropic image and want to revamp it.

I for one am proud to be a misanthrope. Asked by friends why, I generally retort, in Thoreauvian fashion, "why aren't you one?" Given humanity's 10,000 year record of massacres, wars, ecocide, extinctions, holocausts, lethal dogmas, race hatred, casual slaughters, venality, corruption and coercion, it seems to me the burden of proof is on those who see something redeeming about this newfangled hominid. Nevertheless, in these latter days of ecological crisis, misanthropy has become an intellectual issue worthy of discussion. Therefore, I want to give my reasons for being a misanthrope.

First, I assume that the millennia-old environmental crisis is driven by the dubious ethics and ideologies of societies like ours, that phantasmagoria of misbegotten beliefs euphemistically called civilization, which justifies and promotes the destruction of nature. In the industrial age, foremost among these creeds is humanism. It is the poison chalice at our society's lips. The institutions that have seized control of our ecology tell us that their policies against wild nature are making a better world for humans. This is a lie, of course; but easily flattered and eagerly self-interested, most people around the world accept the deceit as the highest endorsement.

Warwick Fox has stated that Deep Ecology has the "negative tack" of exposing the unfounded, anthropocentric claims that rationalize humanity's abuse of the natural world. This is an important, indeed central task of any attempt to liberate nature from human dominance. For me, misanthropy serves that purpose. By attacking human arrogance, by mocking the giddy declarations of humanists about the "wondrous mind of Man," by pointing out the scientific fact that *Homo sapiens* is less important to the biosphere than mycorrhizal fungus, misanthropy undertakes, Coyotelike, to bring back some balance and ecological humility to our self-infatuated species. Humility often requires a little flagellation, the times require humility, and such is the effect of misanthropy.

I'm aware, of course, that our society doesn't represent all humanity. But the fact is most of the world now mimics our dissolute ways. Only truly primal cultures like the Mbuti and Penan have any claim to ecological wisdom, and these are usually frowned upon by humanists as backward, brutish and bereft of the light of social progress. By

necessity I speak to my woeful fellow citizens, and in that context, misanthropy is common sense.

Second, misanthropy strikes a chord. People are tired of hearing about humankind's marvelous achievements and of what Thoreau calls "man-worship." I've talked to hundreds of people over the last year and audiences light up when I point out that there isn't one scrap of evidence that *Homo sapiens* is superior or special or even more interesting than, say, lichen. Some people, mired in ancient Insecurities, don't like being likened to lichen, but most, especially the young, find the idea invigorating. It has the added advantage of being true.

Third, seeking real solutions to the environmental crisis necessitates challenging dogmas near and dear to the hearts of humanists, namely economic and population growth. A radical environmental movement that doesn't confront these issues belies its name. Someone has to declare the obvious need to *decrease* human population, demedicalize society, remove cultural artifacts such as dams, expand wilderness, protect and reintroduce species even at the cost of jobs.

Predictably, it hasn't been humanists.

Although none of us has the solution to the biological meltdown our planet is undergoing, Earth Firsti's role has always been to expand the universe of thinkable thoughts, to introduce an environmental discourse beyond innocuous clichés about recycling, energy conservation, and appropriate technology. To do so one runs the risk of saying something stupid, of offending people, even nice people who probably have enough problems as it is. It opens one up to charges of hypocrisy by ideologues, as if the universe were really interested in my moral status. But that's a risk that misanthropes must take if our culture is ever to be transfigured into some less lethal form. History suggests it probably won't, but thank humanists for that, not misanthropes, not us happy, happy few.

Finally, I see misanthropy in the grand tradition of Heraclitus, Diogenes, Swift, Thoreau, and Abbey — thinkers whose disdain for human narcissism intimated a richer, nobler, humbler way of life. Paradoxically, when human concerns are put first, humans suffer in the end through ecological decline. In contrast, by putting the Earth first, by emphasizing the nonhuman, we have the prospect of creating a society with the optimum amount of real freedom and dignity possible for *Homo sapiens* in this contingent world of ours, this world of limitations.

Misanthropy is a recognition that there are limits to human existence — that humans bumble and cheat, are self-deluded mammals, power hungry and erring by inclination, and therefore should not presume to disturb the fearful beauty of this planet. There are more remarkable things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in humanist philosophy.

I imagine the first real philosopher lived in Sumeria, that foolhardy empire that began the doomed parade of civilization. Looking out of his stuffy, urban flat, he saw serfs working in the fields, slaves building extravagant monuments to some boorish king, bronze-helmeted warriors selling plunder in the crowded streets to greedy merchants,

shrewd priests in white robes eyeing the wives of the faithful while proclaiming the splendors of Ur. What utter nonsense, he must have said, shaking his head. He went out and told people to go back to their nomadic way of life. He was probably laughed at or hanged, and Sumeria slowly slipped into the desert sands.

That man, I assure you, was misanthrope.

Christopher Manes has been writing provocative essays for the Journal almost since its beginning but he is best known now for his highly acclaimed book Green Rage.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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