Dark Mountain Insight

A comment by David Orton

Dark Mountain, Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, editors.
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We are a growing global movement of writers, artists, craftspeople and workers with practical skills who have stopped believing in the stories our civilisation tells itself. We believe we are entering an age of material decline, ecological collapse and social and political uncertainty, and that our cultural responses should reflect this, rather than denying it. *Taken from the **Dark Mountain Project** website*.

Capitalism has absorbed the greens, as it absorbs so many challenges to its ascendancy. ***Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto, 2009, p. 9.***

We believe the world-wide industrial capitalist system is destroying the Earth. This system, with its human-centered view of nature as a "resource" and its roots in endless economic growth and consumerism, has us all on a death path. Needed are new ecological, social, political, spiritual and cultural visions, and a reduction in human population. A new environmental ethic and associated environmental economics are required. Societies have to be ecologically sustainable for the survival of all species on Earth. *Taken from the **Green Web** website.*

INTRODUCTION

I first heard of the British-initiated Dark Mountain Project several months ago, from a discussion on the left bio internet list. My curiosity was aroused. We ordered the book to find out what this project was all about. The **Dark Mountain** book needs to be seen as part of the project, as do my comments on this book. Before the book, there was the 2009 **Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto**, which prints out at about 20 pages. The Manifesto outlines the basic Dark Mountain perspective and was "curated" by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine.

The main significance of the **Dark Mountain** book and the **Manifesto** is to convey to the primed reader a sense of excitement and the awareness that, with these publications, we

see the kick-start of an oppositional cultural movement. One thinks of the publication of the 1985 book **Deep Ecology**, by Bill Devall and George Sessions. This book of readings was a similar cultural event, which, despite its imperfections, kick-started the North American deep ecology movement. This is not to say that **Dark Mountain** is presenting a unique analysis. The book and **Manifesto** lack a sense of historical placement, notwithstanding their evident concern with the importance of "being in place" to do good environmental work. Much of what is being said – around the theme that industrial capitalist society is finished as a sustainable entity, and the urgent necessity for new cultural Earth-centered oppositional visions to emerge – has been said by people linked to the "fundi" or fundamentalist strain among environmentalists and greens. Think of people like John Livingston in Canada, Rudolph Bahro in Germany or Richard Sylvan in Australia, who all have physically departed this world, although their "fundi" ideas remain influential. However, as the publication **Dark Mountain** asserts and any deeper activist knows, absorption to the industrial status quo has become the overwhelming reality among environmentalists and electoral greens.

The Dark Mountaineers are important because they give a very public focus, with a lot of new buzz, to this fundamental oppositional tendency to industrial capitalism. Already this year there was a meeting in North Wales with about 400 people debating Dark Mountain ideas, including with critics like George Monbiot who, although somewhat sympathetic, wants to retain industrial society. I find those who have identified with the **Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto** to be a different kettle of fish to the legions of academics who use ecological and social injustice as 'new' research or to satisfy some pressing publishing ecological or social justice niche, while environmental and social Armageddon draws ever nearer.

The term "Uncivilisation" is frequently used to characterize the Dark Mountain Project. In the editorial for the **Dark Mountain** book, Kingsnorth and Hine define this as "the inevitable crumbling of our current way of our life." (p. 3) They go on to say that "because a civilization is built on stories: when its self-belief falters and its myths are no longer believed in, its end is probably inevitable." (p. 4) So Uncivilisation sets out to discover what the new stories or myths will be, if the future society is to be ecologically sustainable for all species – "The totality of biological life on Earth must be better off with us than without us" (p. 131) and socially just for the human species.

The term "Dark Mountain" comes from a reference in a poem, *"Rearmament"* by the American nature poet Robinson Jeffers. This poet, who is much revered by Dark Mountain followers, speaks of leading the "masses down the dark mountain." I think of the current project as leading people to and "up" the Dark Mountain, and away from the beliefs and mythologies of urban industrial capitalist society. An overall theme seems to be that it is in the hinterlands, where people are still rooted in place, and not in the centers of urbanism, that the needed new Earth-friendly belief systems, repudiating economic growth, "progress", and the ever increasing domination and distancing of humans from the natural world, have their best chance of emerging. The nonhuman-centered writing and art forms which the Dark Mountain Project seeks to stimulate, "comes not, as most

writing still does, from the self-absorbed and self-congratulatory metropolitan centers of civilization but from somewhere on its wilder fringes." (**Manifesto**, p. 13)

As someone who has lived in a relatively wild place in Nova Scotia for the last twenty six years, on an old hill farm that has returned to being a forest and wildlife refuge (with outhouse, hand pump for water, heat only by wood, etc.), I can identify with this sentiment. One adjusts to the cycles of biological life and this can, if one works at it, become reflected in one's thinking and writing. Thus, for example, when there is a conflict between human and ecosystem interests, I try to put ecosystem interests – that is, the interests of other species and their habitats – in first place, over human interests. This does not make me indifferent to social justice issues, but they are secondary to ecosystem health.

The **Dark Mountain** text contains a mixture of "essays" "fiction", "poetry", "conversations", "images" and "others" (such as the Editorial written by Kingsnorth and Hine, Mountaineers, and a primer listing some writers who have influenced the editors). These categories are not confined to distinct sections of the book but are interspersed throughout the text. I think it was a mistake not to reproduce in the book the original **Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto**, since this is the foundational document and a good summary of the basic ideas for a wider audience.

DISCUSSION

The only mythology that is valid today is the mythology of the planet – and we don't have such a mythology. *Joseph Campbell, 1988, **The Power of Myth**, p. 22.*

The ability to govern without overt coercion depends largely on the ability of those in power to exploit systems of belief that the larger population shares. *Gramsci, as cited by Richard Sylvan, in **A Companion in Contemporary Political Philosophy**, 1993, p. 236.*

Some good essays

The outstanding essay in **Dark Mountain** was *"Confessions of a recovering environmentalist"* by Paul Kingsnorth. It outlined the impact of his family background and his environmental involvements on his own thinking, along with showing the dominance of anthropocentrism in the movement and the consequences which flow from this: "the mass destruction of the world's remaining wild places in order to feed the human economy." (p. 53) Mainstream environmentalism does not have a sense of place, and Kingsnorth points out what many of us have experienced, that the environmental movement has become a "bolthole" for the Left. (p. 56) About the current fixation of the allegedly green Left with "eco-socialism", Kingsnorth says that this is "a conflation of concepts that pretty much guarantees the instant hostility of 95% of the population." (p. 57) He further notes, "today's environmentalism is about people. It is a consolation prize

for a gaggle of washed-up Trots…" (p. 58) The whole article is written with passion and anger, and is highly analytical and radical. I consider this writer a person of the Left, and the criticisms he raises reverberate with my own experience. I have found that for most ecosocialists, human interests remain in first place, and human population reduction is only a subject of ridicule. (It is highly baffling for me that Kingsnorth also has an obscure, self-indulgent fiction piece, *"the lost gods"*, in **Dark Mountain**, apparently part of a "novel-in progress", written in a for me unreadable "hybrid of Old and modern English", and situated in occupied England after an invasion in the eleventh century.)

Another excellent article in this book is by Simon Fairlie, *"Myths of civilization #1 'The Tragedy of the Commons.'"* It is a critique of the article by Garrett Hardin used by free enterprisers to justify further privatizing the Commons, as here on the East Coast of Canada with the fishery. The assertion or myth is that Nature can only be 'managed' if it is privatized. [See for an example, the 1982 task force report, **Navigating Troubled Waters: A New Policy for the Atlantic Fisheries**, Michael Kirby, Chairman, Chapter 10, "The Harvesting Sector", which opens with a quote from Hardin.]

While Fairlie's article is too morally superior in tone, e.g., "Hardin's basic argument (or 'platitude')", the analysis is first rate. He also shows how historically, collective ownership of land in Britain has been undermined:
"Between 1760 and 1870, about 7 million acres (about one sixth the area of England) were changed, by some 4,000 Acts of Parliament, from common land to enclosed land." (p. 191)
But this article is still anthropocentric, accepting human ownership of land.

Several articles in **Dark Mountain** concern themselves with land ownership, e.g. Jay Griffiths, "This England." The basic deep ecology viewpoint towards land ownership was of course put by Arne Naess: "The earth does not belong to humans." (**Deep Ecology For The 21st Century**, p. 74) Rudolf Bahro had the same position.

One of the essayists, Glynn Hughes, is a supporter of the dominant industrial myth "that only nuclear technology is a possible answer to climate change." (p. 173)

Deep Ecology

There is no direct mention of Arne Naess or deep ecology in **The Manifesto**, although Naess had made the overall shallow/deep distinctions of the ecology movement in the early 1970s. The same analysis is put forth by Kingsnorth and Hine, as for example in the quote about the absorption of the greens. (Absent, however, in **The Manifesto,** is the concern for human population reduction put forth by deep ecology and many activists, and more generally by those who support the left biocentric theoretical tendency within deep ecology.) It was Naess who articulated that in the age of ecology, individuals needed to primarily self-define as part of the natural world and not as social or religious beings. Naess saw that the personal self must withdraw its allegiance to industrial

capitalist society (Rudolf Bahro also wrote about this) and the Dark Mountain Project is on a similar path.

Art as a political statement

There are 18 poets contributing to the book. Poems which raise questions about how humans conduct themselves in Nature are of much interest to me, but I like the position of the poet to be made clear and not just be a recording voice. The line by Dougald Hine in one of the essays, that "the poetic license is a day pass from the asylum" (p. 87) has some appeal. My own bias is towards the non-fiction material in this book (although among left biocentrists there are several poets. See, for example, Dandelion Times.)

I think that successful, grounded, ecocentric poetry and songs mean that the composers are also environmental organizers, for example Judi Bari in the U.S. (1949-1997). Or, here in Nova Scotia, the many environmental, feminist, and social justice songs of Judy Davis, who recently died. We should not lightly give ecocentric benedictions to those who mention Nature in their poetry, or who depict environmental scenes in their paintings or photographs. Art has to undermine the industrial status-quo, to deserve such an accolade. I did find the two poems by Charles Davies, "The Way Home" and Tom Scott "Stain" well done.

One of the legacies for all of us in the West, being raised in an anti-communist culture, is that under the banner of "artistic freedom", leading writers, poets, musicians and painters – the allegedly uncommitted artists – were during the Cold War often covertly mobilized by the intelligence agencies against advocacy art and supporting a "party line" or "socialist realism." This inculcated in the culture the viewpoint that "art" should be above politics. This is well discussed in the 1999 book, **The Cultural Cold War: The CIA And The World Of Arts And Letters**, by Frances Stonor Saunders. The author, herself an anti-communist, shows that the positions pursued by many financially subsidized, "non-aligned" cultural workers in the West, benefitted American foreign policy objectives. Dark Mountaineers need to pursue and measure themselves against the need for advocacy art.

In the left bio internet discussion of the Dark Mountain Project, one commentator, himself an active poet and writer, noted that while supporters of this Project were undoubtedly our allies, "their talk is more poetic than philosophical, let alone practical." He went on to say, they too "flippantly disregard others who are trying to change the world." Also, "their vision sometimes seems childish, fantastic, wishful. You can't change the world by writing." For this person, activists and campaigners are "the salt of it all." He concluded, "So their vision – correct in its general pathos – should be balanced by a more comprehensive cumulative work by many doers – not only writers."

Another person who read this comment in draft form – who has been engaged for about twenty years in the local area with forests and wildlife, and who has been working with young and not so young people in fostering a new land ethic – while generally

supportive, expressed some uneasiness. He said it was important that, as well as fostering new cultural visions, the Dark Mountaineers should remain practically engaged in this world and reach out to others. He was concerned about what we would retain from industrial society – "light technologies" and skills – which could help humans not only live more lightly on the land but were also labour-saving. Also, he was concerned about maintaining an educated public that could be persuaded to bring about the major societal changes that are called for at this time, while retaining social order and not anarchy.

If we are activists who want to change this world, as well as philosophically describe it, we have to be able to argue a case before public opinion, in order to win over others to our side. We can't just "feel" something, but we have to communicate feelings to others which will win them over. Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which extends ethical considerations to non-human components of what he called the land community, to include "soils, waters, plants, and animals" is one example. He noted that, ecologically, such an ethic is a limitation on human freedom of action. Perhaps a less known comment from Leopold, but very interesting for any discussions of beauty, is "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (For example, industrializing the countryside with wind turbines clearly undermines beauty concerns.) So the well-being of the biotic community becomes how we should evaluate our interactions with the natural world. This is a powerful ethical and ecological principle for use in argumentation.

Of primary interest for me in **Dark Mountain** were the 13 essays and the more "literal" ecocentric fiction, like the pieces "Loss Soup" and "To the bone" by Nick Hunt – the inhumanity portrayed was horrible and reminded me of Farley Mowat's **A Whale For The Killing** – and the two conversations. The "images" in the book are examples of left-asides by me, because it was not at all obvious what the general messages are they were meant to convey, apart from alienation from living Nature.

When a book is consciously "artsy", like **Dark Mountain**, the reader easily has a feeling of incompetence if one does not 'get' what is being said in a poem, or an image, or in a non-fiction piece. One hesitates to see the problem as in the particular cultural worker, for fear of considering oneself a philistine or of being considered such by others. So the response can be silence, not an insensitive statement which one can later be hung by. I hope any such statements on my part can be viewed from this perspective. However, having duly noted this philistine concern, ecocentric cultural workers have to think of themselves and their writings, poems, paintings, songs, etc. as agents of social change. If not, this is self-indulgence at a time of planetary meltdown. As Marx pointed out so long ago in the **11th Thesis on Feuerbach**, one must not only interpret the world, but also change it.

CONCLUSION

I am a fan of the Dark Mountain Project and of the **Dark Mountain** book, despite various quibbles that were raised. As the **Dark Mountain Manifesto** pointed out, many

have "trained themselves not to see", in this age of ecocide. I applaud the daring of Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine in launching such a project. From my perspective, given the existing state of the environmental and green movements, Dark Mountaineers are badly needed. Contrary to what for example the electoral greens in Canada promote, the future will not be some upgraded version of the present society.

There are some overstatements, or simplified "one basket" analyses, of the left and environmental movements, and a seeming unawareness of those who have gone before. There is also, it seems, an unawareness of left biocentrism, which brings together deep ecology and a social justice perspective, and where "community" includes not just humans but other animals, plants, and the Earth itself. However, what is being said, namely, that "we are entering an age of material decline, ecological collapse and social and political uncertainty, and that our cultural responses should reflect this, rather than denying it", is a key message for our dark time. Left biocentrists have much in common with the Dark Mountain Project, and we must seek out that which unites us in order to accelerate the needed work.

As Joseph Campbell has pointed out in the 1988 book, **The Power of Myth**, we need new mythologies or stories to reintegrate humans into planetary life. Campbell showed that there are two different orders of mythology. One, which is badly needed today, relates to placing the individual in accord with nature and the natural world; and the other, which is sociological, links the individual to a particular society – here industrial capitalist society and its "of course" controlling and human-centered legitimating assumptions. The Dark Mountain Project points the direction forward to undermining these industrial assumptions and this is a major contribution.

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