

The Thinking of Pentti Linkola: A Review

By David Orton

Can Life Prevail? A Radical Approach to the Environmental Crisis

by Pentti Linkola, Integral Tradition Publishing, 2009, 207 pages, paperback, ISBN: 978-1-907166-00-6.

“What matters for me is the preservation of life on Earth until a distant future.” (p. 19)

“The underlying values of a society ought to be questioned, when such a society is headed to its doom.” (p. 138)

“The United States is the most colossally aggressive empire in world history: the number of US military bases around the world is simply bewildering. Through its bases, the US spreads its economic and cultural influence by profaning, subjugating and silencing others. On all continents it finances and arms the governments and guerrilla movements it favours, frequently switching sides. The US employs death squads to do away with dissidents, and personally wages war when needed.... The US is the most wretched villainous state of all times.” (p. 164)

Introduction

For the past few years I have occasionally come across references to a Finnish eco-philosopher, born in 1932, by the name of Pentti Linkola. I knew he was also a fisherman (apparently for about 35 years) and, as we find out in **Can Life Prevail?**, lives simply in the countryside, his place surrounded by clear cuts. After reading the Introduction by Brett Stevens, I now know that he was born into an affluent, university-employed family and attended college where he studied zoology and botany. He was never jailed and he is not a pacifist. I have not read anything by Linkola before - though I have had, for a long time, a quote by him pinned on my wall, designed to keep me focused on what is important: “Unemployment is always better than doing harmful work.” I have used this quote to infuriate, in forest discussions in Nova Scotia where the forest destroyers always talk about the jobs at stake for those of us trying to curtail their activities.

Prior to the appearance of this book of essays in 2009, Linkola’s writings were not available in English. Like another significant deep ecology-oriented thinker, Sigmund Kvaløy of Norway, Linkola was hard to access. Usually this writer’s views were described as “controversial.” Sometimes he was labeled an “eco-fascist”, as mentioned in the Introduction. Knowing that this label was sometimes used as an attack term against ecocentric writers who put the well being of the Earth before that of humans (see my 2000 article [Ecofascism: What is It? A Left Biocentric](#)

[Analysis](#)), I very much wanted to examine the ideas of this person.

Thanks to the internet, I recently became aware that Linkola has a book out in English – a selection of articles. Although it has a “hurried into print” feel about it, on reading Linkola I thought of Aldo Leopold’s book of essays **A Sand County Almanac**. Both these writers are excellent naturalists (Linkola is a “birder” with a lot of bird banding under his belt), students of the forests, and philosophical but grounded in practicality.

Can Life Prevail?, with its title addressing the fundamental question of our time, is relatively slender, just over 200 large-print pages, and is divided into five chapters. There are altogether 37 short articles, most of them dating back to the 1990s. They are grouped under the following chapter headings:

Chapter 1: Finland (six articles)

Chapter 2: Forests (six articles)

Chapter 3: Animals (eleven articles)

Chapter 4: The World and Us (eleven articles)

Chapter 5: The Prerequisites for Life (three articles)

Linkola has written a number of books – we are told his first book was published in 1955 – and is a well-known public voice in Finland. My comments are based solely on **Can Life Prevail?**, as I am not familiar, because of language barriers, with his other writings.

This review was written to introduce Linkola to other deeper Greens and environmentalists. I also wanted to assess the validity of the claim on the cover, that this Finnish writer “is among the foremost exponents of the philosophy of deep ecology.” (Yet Arne Naess is directly referred to by name only once in the whole book.) I believe that supporters of deep ecology will find various “wild” statements by Linkola used by our opponents, to try and discredit deep ecology. It would be good to go to the source to have an overview of this writer’s contribution to Green theory, and to place any perceived or real negativism in context.

In addition, I wanted to look at the use of the term “ecofascist” in the context of Linkola’s writings, to see if there was any validity in its use to describe him so. This concern is part of a project which has come to increasingly involve me. If allegedly “democratic” capitalist societies, because of catering to human short-term selfish interests, are driving us all to ecological catastrophe, as Pentti Linkola asserts; and if some of us see this, when does it become incumbent upon us to move politically against such a human self-centered democracy? Under what political labels can we do this? Don’t we have to move beyond an understanding of “democracy” that is only human-referenced, if we are to have any future? I have come to believe, after reading this book, that Pentti Linkola is at the forefront of this discussion in a Finnish context.

A dominant impression which remained with me after reading this book of essays, apart from the belief that the author would have serious trouble with Homeland Security if trying to visit the United States, is Pentti Linkola's love for the Earth and for all her creatures (except species introduced to Finland). The millions of organisms on Earth which are the product of evolution are our "sisters and brothers." (p. 158) For Linkola, as for Aldo Leopold, "community" is not restricted to humankind. Beauty is "far more important" than an economy. (p. 35) One comes to see, after reading these essays, that such a love transforms how one looks at the importance of human life. Its importance becomes of a lower order of concern. As Linkola puts it,

"Mankind is battling other creatures for living space. Mankind's inner disputes are only indirectly interesting, depending on the degree to which their effects either preserve or destroy the biosphere." (p. 168)

Moving away from a human-centered consciousness to an Earth-centered consciousness is the basic contribution of deep ecology. Social justice for humans must strengthen Earth justice. As the Canadian eco-philosopher and activist Stan Rowe, who was also a person of the Left, so eloquently expressed, "We are Earthlings first, humans second." (**Earth Alive**, p. 21.) Those who mobilize under the banners of "social justice", "eco-socialism", or of "fighting environmental racism" are often guilty of human chauvinism or speciesism. Notice how these groups tie themselves up in knots over the question of human population reduction. No matter how they publicly declare their environmental concerns, they are quite prepared to sacrifice non-human life forms and their habitat requirements to alleged human interests. Not so Pentti Linkola. Deep ecology is fundamental for environmentalism. The deep ecologist is the guardian of life, who has to go against human self-interest for preservation of biodiversity. For example, you do not destroy the forest or fill in the wetland for housing. Most people cannot accept that life as we know it in the industrialized world is coming to an end. The author believes this very strongly.

This book needs to be read and seriously thought about.

DISCUSSION

"It is absurd to believe that a compromise is possible with the champions of economic growth, whose arguments spell utter doom." (p. 63)

"When it comes to woodlands, some people believe the highest value to be the economic growth of Finland; others the preservation of life on Earth. No serious exchange of opinions can take place between those holding these two opposite stances: they simply have to settle in delivering separate speeches." (p. 61)

“If nothing else, the rectification of the global carbon balance - the most serious of all serious problems - would require the forest industry to be shut down for decades.” (p. 63)

General World View

One thing we learn from the Introduction, but not from the various essays, is that Pentti Linkola has created a “Finnish Natural Heritage Foundation”, whose purpose is to acquire forest land, one acre at a time, and “to conserve it from utilization by others.” We are told that he has “thrust almost all of his monetary property” into this foundation. (p. 13) Linkola is not just a talker and writer. One of the Forests essays however makes his views on private property clear:

“For a protector of life, who is moved by the diversity of life (biodiversity), it is unthinkable that the whole Earth should belong only to one animal species, humanity.” (p. 61)

The position of Arne Naess was that “The earth does not belong to humans.” From his perspective, deep ecology-oriented thinkers should do everything in their power to undermine ‘private property’ laws and the anthropocentric view that one species, humans, can “own” land or other species.

The person writing the Introduction – and Pentti Linkola himself – while claiming the mantle of deep ecology, presents this Finnish writer more as a heroic but unique individual. There is no discussion of the basic deep ecology world view associated with Naess and his supporters, and how this relates to Linkola and Finnish society. There is only one direct reference to Naess. Yet there are about ten pages of text outlining “The ABC of the Deep Ecologist.” Also, there is no mention of the eight-point Deep Ecology Platform or of any standard theoretical positions. Yet, there is the claim in the Introduction, that Linkola’s theories “tie deep ecology with a recognition that democratic, liberal societies cannot control themselves.” (p.15) In one place, Linkola equates self-realization with “pure selfishness” (p.155), which is totally opposed to how deep ecology supporters, and Naess himself, would use this concept.

Linkola is a deep ecologist, because of how he sees the natural world and the relationship of humans to this world. His personal lifestyle also reflects his basic philosophical beliefs. Yet I would not describe him, as does the book cover, as “among the foremost exponents of the philosophy of deep ecology.” He seems to be much more of a loner from a deep ecology perspective. In this book of essays, he does not relate his own ideas to those of the late Arne Naess, the founder of deep ecology, who died in January of 2009. There is no mention of the Deep Ecology Platform or of theoretical developments within deep ecology taking place outside

of Finland, like the left biocentric tendency within deep ecology, which brings together an all-species ecocentrism with social justice for humans.

Sometimes the language in this book seems a little strained, as Finnish is made over into English. There is also a male bias in the language. Linkola often writes loosely and from the persona of “a character” who is expected to say something outrageous. The following comment would be one of a number of examples from **Can Life Prevail?**:

“It would be a spark of hope if only wars were to morph in such a way as to target the actual breeding potential of a population: young females and children, half of whom are girls. Unless this happens, wars will mostly remain a waste of time or even a harmful activity.” (p.173)

In my judgement, the author holds forth too often on the future shape of society, where one cannot make exact predictions because in the end they are speculative. These views come to undermine the many deeper observations about current Finnish and world society which arise from his personal experience and reflections.

Indictment of Capitalist Democracy as Suicidal Society and the Alternative

“Democracy and the public right to vote guarantee that no one other than the sycophants of the people will rise to power – and people never clamour for anything other than bread and circuses, regardless of the costs and consequences.” (pp.159-160)

“The most serious environmental disasters occur in democracies. Any kind of dictatorship is superior to democracy, for a system where the individual is always bound one way or another leads to utter destruction more slowly. When individual freedom reigns, humanity is both the killer and the victim.” (p. 174)

“As the deep ecologist emphasizes those factors beneficial to the preservation and continuation of life, his arguments will always be above all others.” (pp. 168-169)

For Linkola, if life is to prevail, it means giving up Western culture and the way of life associated with it. Parliamentary democracy is “a suicidal form of government” (p. 159), which is based on self-indulgence: “Our society and ways of life are based on what man desires rather than what is best for him.” (pp. 204-205) Unlike past societies, humankind is now separate from the natural world. Population growth and increasing consumption are major factors. Procreation has to be regulated by society, it cannot be a family decision. “Every time a new child is born, the value of each human on the Earth slightly decreases.” (p. 139) Human population needs to be about ten percent of the existing world population. There is a “mindless over-valuation” of human life on a

global scale (p. 137) at the expense of the ecosystems of sea, land and air. Maintaining ecological balance will be the key factor in deciding which forms of industry will be permitted in the non-suicidal society of the future. Technology has been our master, not our servant.

I agree with the critique of democracy by Linkola, whether associated with capitalism or socialism, because neither democracy includes the interests of species other than humans or the overall health of the planet. (Socialist democracy is far preferable, in my view, from a solely human perspective if, as well as guaranteeing personal freedoms, it includes access to health care, education, employment, housing, equal life opportunities etc. for all citizens.) I believe, like Linkola, that we are on course to ecological Armageddon and an accompanying social disintegration, looming on the horizon for those who care to see. Existing political systems are not up to any major reversal of policy. They are wedded to facilitating increasing economic growth and increasing personal consumerism.

I am always amazed that anyone, including Linkola, can talk about capitalist societies as being “democratic” societies, and as being focused on citizen self-indulgence. Political decisions, in such societies, including Canada, if important, reflect class and corporate interests, not citizen interests. For example, we live in a local environment somewhat analogous to that of Pentti Linkola. We live in rural Nova Scotia on an old hill farm that has gone back to forest, surrounded on all sides by clear cuts and sprayed scars of industrial forestry, with its depleted wildlife. We have lived here for about 23 years. During this time, with quite a number of other rural people, a campaign was mounted against industrial forestry, essentially to no avail. This environmental vandalism which passes as forestry, continues unchecked everywhere in our province. It has no majority popular support in rural Nova Scotia. But it is kept in place because a business elite, assisted by an elected political elite, wants it this way. And more money is made by destroying a forest in the process of harvesting a forest. After any logging “show”, there is no forest cover left for the animals who need the forest as a home, and the streams that need an all year round water supply to fully fulfill their life potential. Capitalist forestry does not illustrate real human-centered democracy at work.

Journalists, who Linkola has a deep passion about as “unbelievably irresponsible, vile, and harmful” (p. 36), play a key role in spreading false consciousness about any serious issue. Discussions around controversial issues are a sham, in that the views sought by the ruling corporate and political elites are presented as fact without serious discussion of the long term ecological or social costs, such as with clear cutting and forest spraying.

Andrew Dobson, the British Green deep ecology-influenced theorist, has spoken of any future green society as being one where the citizen is subject to much greater social control: "There is no doubt that ecologism's stress on 'limits' of all sorts amounts to the potential curtailment of

certain taken-for-granted freedoms, particularly in the realms of production, consumption and mobility." (**Green Political Thought**, 3rd ed., p. 165) But this seems to be a taboo subject for most Green writers. Green political parties, like the Canadian federal party, avoid such ideas like the plague. Pentti Linkola's ideas are so jarring, because this is not a taboo subject for him. He is not shy about making many specific claims as to what a future ecologically responsible society should look like. Yet, while his indictment of Finnish and world society rings largely true, his predictions for the future are highly speculative and often seem designed to provoke.

His political model is very much against traditional Green thinking, which stresses local control and involvement by citizens in a bioregional economy, and a new planetary all-species consciousness. Linkola, however, seems to advocate for the creation of a centralized government and tight citizen controls, with Plato-type eco-philosopher kings and queens dispersing ecological and social wisdom, from the center to the periphery. At the same time he supports a more traditional Green view of population dispersal – living closer to a land base, with each region of a country producing its own food. He says that a government “led by a few wise individuals is necessary to protect the people from itself.” (p. 205) But he also states that he has no idea how such “wise individuals” could rise to power. For this thinker, doing nothing is not an option, because it means that human suffering “will be maximal.” (p. 157) Linkola holds that his ideas, if implemented, would not only uphold his primary goal of the preservation of life but, paradoxically, would provide a “better standard of living” for humankind. (p. 205)

Ecofascism

What supporters of deep ecology should prepare for, as **Can Life Prevail?** becomes known, is that there are quite a few outrageous or quirky statement, which will be brought forward by the opponents of deep ecology. We can refuse to support statements which do not seem to advance ecocentric discussions and basic social justice. However, we do need to see that Linkola makes us aware that all of our activities and policies as humans must be evaluated from their impact on overall biodiversity and the continuation of planetary life. Being just human-centered in any form of ecopolitics must be repudiated as human chauvinism. According to Linkola, existing political arrangements are not working in capitalist democracies, and new methods of political engagement are urgently called for. As Rudolf Bahro pointed out, we cannot acquiesce to our own demise, which is all we are being offered by the capitalist politicians and their Green Party pale green allies, who are only attempting to brush the teeth of industrial society and not fundamentally change it.

There is an attempt to link the term “fascism” or “ecofascism” to Pentti Linkola, or more generally to deep ecology. As Arne Naess has shown, the theoretical concept of “intrinsic value”

for all components of the natural world, at the core of deep ecology – and very evident in this book of essays – is not linked in any way to humans for legitimation or validation. In speaking of intrinsic value, Naess says, “This is squarely an *antifascist* position. It is incompatible with fascist racism and fascist nationalism, and also with the special ethical status accorded the (supreme) Leader.” (**Selected Works**, Volume Ten, p. 95.) If there is any meaning to the term “ecofascist”, I would say this can be applied to individuals, groups, industries, or states which use fascist methods of organizing, ignoring opposition to destroy Nature and wildlife purely for profit and self-interest. Pentti Linkola shows a deep love of Nature and wildlife. His writings and life exemplify this. Linkola, like Rudolf Bahro, is trying to see how to jump-start a movement for fundamental social change. He is not very optimistic that this is possible. It is the *conscious* Earth destroyers, for example, those who carry out industrial forestry in Finland and Nova Scotia with only a bottom line in mind, who are the ecofascists, if we want to use such a term. These are the people who Linkola has spent his life combating. We can disagree with some of his prescriptions for political change, but he is no ecofascist.

CONCLUSION

I am pleased to have obtained this book. Pentti Linkola is a very interesting Finnish thinker, with a lot of good ideas about the coming eco-catastrophe and how it should be addressed. Based on my reading of it, I recommend **Can Life Prevail?**, to Greens and environmentalists interested in theoretical issues.

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(For a thoughtful discussion of Linkola’s views, see Keith Thomas’ [Review](#) of **Can Life Prevail?**)

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