

Why I am not a Misanthrope

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In last *EF! Journal* (Yule, 1990), Chris Manes responds to the question "Why are you a misanthrope?" by saying "Why aren't you one?" After all, humans have a 10,000 year history of massacres, wars, ecocide, holocaust, etc., so the burden of proof is on us non-misanthropes.

I would like to respond to Manes' challenge, and my answer has nothing to do with humanism, anthropocentrism, or the belief that humans are a "higher" life form. Unlike Murray Bookchin, I reject that claim from the git-go. I believe in biocentrism, and think that all life forms are equal. I agree that human population is totally out of control. And I am as appalled as any misanthrope at the havoc that humans have wreaked on the natural world.

But I disagree with Manes' conclusion that the problem is "humankind." You cannot blame the destruction of the earth on, for example, the Quiche tribes of Guatemala or the Penan of Malaysia. These people have lived in harmony with the earth for 10,000 years. The only way you could identify the earth's destroyers as "humankind" would be to exempt such people from the category of "human." Otherwise you would have to admit that it is not humans-as-a-species, but the way certain humans live, that is destroying the earth.

Manes briefly acknowledges that these ecologically sound human cultures exist, but he dismisses them as trivial because "the fact is most of the world now mimics our dissolute ways." This statement completely ignores the manner in which "most of the world" was forced to abandon their indigenous cultures or be destroyed. You cannot equate the slave and the slave-master. Only after massacres, torture, ecocide and other unspeakable brutality did the peoples of the world acquiesce to the conquering hordes with their culture of greed and destruction.

Technocratic man, with his linear view of the world, tends to see tribal societies as earlier, less evolved forms of his own society, rather than as alternative, simultaneously existing methods of living on the earth. The presumption is that, given time, these cultures would somehow be corrupted like ours. But there is no evidence whatsoever that these ancient civilizations would have changed without our violent intervention. So it is not humans, but industrial-technocratic societies, that are destroying the earth.

In the same manner that misanthropy blames all humans for the crimes of the industrial/technocratic society, so does it blame all humans for the crimes of men. The list of atrocities for which Manes condemns the human race—massacres, wars, ecocide, holocaust—are not the work of women. Of course a few women can be found and paraded out who participate in the male power structure. But by and large, throughout history, wars and atrocities have been the territory of men. And the societies that engage in them have been run by men, in the interest of men, and against the interests of women. By categorizing as "human" traits which are actually male, misanthropes are being androcentric (male-centered) instead of biocentric (life-centered) as they claim to be. Vandana Sheeva of the Chipko movement in India put it best. She said the problem is not humans. It is white, technocratic men who are destroying the earth.

So misanthropy is not a form of humility, as Chris Manes says. It is a form of arrogance. By blaming the entire human species for the crimes of white, technocratic men, Manes conveniently avoids any real analysis of who is responsible for the death of the planet. Not surprisingly, Manes himself is a member of the group that most benefits from our consumptive society—privileged white urban men.

If the purpose of philosophy is just to play mind games, then misanthropy can be seen as provocative or enticing. But if the purpose of philosophy is to help us analyze the crisis we are in so that we can try to find solutions, misanthropy fails. It preserves the status quo by refusing to distinguish between oppressor and oppressed. It goes against one of the basic instincts of all life forms, preservation of the species. And, without contributing anything of value to an analysis of the problem, it alienates us from the people we need to work with to bring about change—people whose ideas are grounded in reality and experience, not in college textbooks.

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