

Clarifying the Challenges: A Response to Zhiwa Woodbury's Review and Response to *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life* (2nd Ed.) by Andy Fisher

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Abstract

In this response to Zhiwa Woodbury's review of my book Radical Ecopsychology (2nd ed.), I clarify positions of mine that I believe Woodbury presents either inaccurately or inadequately. I do this by placing his comments and criticisms within the context of the issues I think they raise about the development of ecopsychology: the conflict between the inherent radicalism of ecopsychology and the historical conservatism of psychology; the need to develop critical distance from eco-destructive systems that need to be transformed or transcended; the challenge of preserving the truths that are essential to ecopsychology as we attempt to move from periphery to center; and the need to offer new images as part of the process of ecological social change. I comment throughout on the relevance of my argument that ecopsychology is inherently radical for making sense of the first-generation/second-generation ecopsychology crossroads.

Zhiwa Woodbury offers his review of my book as an exercise in the kind of debate I encourage, using it as an occasion to address the first-generation/second-generation schism in ecopsychology. He is broadly in agreement with my idea that ecopsychology is best pursued as a radical project, and he is favorably inclined to much of what I say, but he wishes to advance his

own approach (his “quantum ecopsychological worldview”) as an improvement over mine. Although I appreciate the effort at dialogue, I have two major complaints with the review. The first is that he presents my views inaccurately or inadequately, which either gives readers a false impression of my book or leaves them in the dark about what I really said. My second objection relates to the first, in that because Woodbury is working with a restricted understanding of what I will here call my radical project argument I think he under-appreciates the theoretical moves I am making and rather splits theory from practice. I would like to take this opportunity, then, to provide some clarification and respond in that light to Woodbury's comments and criticisms. In the spirit of his review, I also wish to demonstrate briefly the significance of my radical project argument for making sense of the first-generation/second-generation crossroads.

Radical Ecopsychology

In *Radical Ecopsychology* I had two main aims. The first was to advance my argument that ecopsychology is an inherently radical project, the word radical meaning “going to the roots.” I suggested that ecopsychology is radical in two senses. In a *therapeutic-reflective* sense it is about remembering the rootedness of the human psyche in earthly relations. In a *critical* sense it is about addressing the historical, social, political, and other roots that account for our alienation from nature and for the social divisions (race, class, gender, etc.) that are interrelated with the destruction of the earth. These two senses are not separate, moreover, but relate dialectically as two sides of a whole. In attempting to provide a map for this whole, I suggested that when the

various activities associated with ecopsychology are organized into four broad tasks (psychological, philosophical, practical, and critical), a coherent, radical project comes into view. This contradicts Kahn and Hasbach's (2013) assertion that there is "no easy way to fully systematize the field" (p. 66). It also challenges their explicit depoliticization of ecopsychology (Hasbach et al., 2012). In the second edition, I used the new chapter to continue making my radical project argument and to consider further the field's developmental challenges. I argued that for ecopsychology to participate in the ecological transformation of society it must itself stand for a radical transformation of psychology. Otherwise, it will not be capable of tracing the complex internal relations among the regions of psyche, nature, and society, nor of mobilizing a uniquely ecopsychological politics.

The second aim of the book was to illustrate the radicalness of ecopsychology by way of my own naturalistic and experiential approach. This approach is naturalistic in that it promotes fidelity to the claims and limits of human nature, linking these to the claims and limits of the larger natural world. It is experiential in that it emphasizes that our alienation from nature includes alienation from the bodily felt experiencing through which we interpret the demands or claims of nature. It thus involves a therapeutic return to the felt body. I suggested, finally, that a naturalistic and experiential approach can be used as a basis for critical social theorizing, contributing thereby to the building of an ecological society.

In summarizing the book, Woodbury mostly discusses my naturalistic psychology. As for my radical project argument he appears to equate this only with the idea of precipitating social transformation. Curiously, he downplays the need for theorizing, saying that the purpose of ecopsychology is not to explain but rather to catalyze. This despite my strong claim that ecopsychology has suffered from a lack of scholarship and that the field must enter into difficult intellectual territory if it is to come to a better understanding of itself, its subject matter, and its worldly practice. I think it is Woodbury's Prigoginian reading of ecopsychology—as a quest for the holy grail of a new myth that will go viral—that leads him to miss the significance of the scholarly issues I am raising. In the responses that follow I therefore place Woodbury's criticisms and suggestions in the context of the larger questions or issues they prompt for me about the development of ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology's Inherent Radicalism, Psychology's Historical Conservatism

In presenting my views on science, Woodbury relies not on his reading of my book but on Craig Chalquist's (2013) brief characterization of my positions in a chapter I wrote for the Kahn and Hasbach (2012) anthology. The result is that Woodbury notes only that I do not

reject science (Kahn and Hasbach's charge against first-generation ecopsychology) but rather am opposed to reductionism and dualism. Instead of offering the reader an evaluation of my argument that ecopsychology implies an entirely different approach to science, he suggests that quantum physics might provide a good "middle ground" science for the field. To argue, as I do in my recent writings (Fisher, 2012, 2013), for a less alienated and more ecologically mature, dialectical, hermeneutically sensitized,¹ and delimited science is to my mind a better approach than simply to replace conventional science somehow with quantum mechanics. I am aiming at a praxis-oriented method that can incorporate both recollective and critical moments, with a revisioned empiricism as part of the overall method. I argue that if ecopsychology is to aid us in becoming whole, vital people and in building a culture that reunites psyche and nature then its methods must integrate science with what Jürgen Habermas (1984) calls the aesthetic-expressive and moral-practical value spheres, both of which are grounded in orders of reason that are different from that of science. It is ideas such as these that I would prefer to see debated.

The larger issue, in my view, is that ecopsychologists have greatly underestimated the degree to which psychology and its methods must be reconstructed if ecopsychology is truly to be capable of opening us to the more-than-human and of participating in the transition to an ecological society. What must be named is the conflict between the need for radical reconstruction, on the one hand, and psychology's notorious conservatism, on the other. The message of my book is that to ecologize psychology is to radicalize it. But psychology's strong allegiance to the status quo and its pervasive anti-intellectualism make this a very difficult exercise. In this regard, I do not think that second-generation authors have sufficiently demonstrated an appreciation for the thoroughly dualistic nature of modern thought and for the *necessity* of incorporating extra-scientific interpretive and critical discourses if we are to build a genuinely ecological psychology. Despite allowing for a degree of methodological diversity in ecopsychology, Kahn and Hasbach (2012) are clearly advocating for a ramping up of conventional empiricism, including by suggesting that environmental and conservation psychology be included under the umbrella of ecopsychology. They evidence little interest, moreover, in critically reflecting on how psychology's own economic, political, and philosophical roots underlie the discipline's preoccupations with experimental-statistical science and professional status. For me, ecopsychology is about putting psychology into the service

¹That is, a science sensitive to the interpretive biases in the research situation.

of all life. If this means that we have to radically reimagine psychology, then I think that is what we should do.

The Need for Critical Distance

Woodbury writes that I view technological progress as “the root of all evil in the modern world” (2013, p. 153). I really must object to such a sweeping misrepresentation, especially because it casts me in the mold of a first-generation caricature when my intention has been precisely to avoid such one-dimensionality. He furthermore presents none of my specific positions, so the reader is left only with Woodbury’s discussion of social media rather than a true summary and evaluation of my ideas. The radical view holds that our collective problems are of a deeply rooted or thoroughgoing nature and will not be solved without major systems change. We therefore need ways to achieve critical distance from these systems so that we can better comprehend them and see how they need to be transformed or transcended at this moment of crisis. It is this need that I was attempting to meet in my chapter on technology. In the interest of clarification, I will respond to Woodbury by discussing three aspects of my discussion in that chapter.

First, I discussed technological progress considered as an ideology based in the spiritual delusion of technosalvationism, the hubristic fantasy that the technological domination of nature will relieve all our suffering and return us to a kind of paradise. I still think this is an important ecopsychological topic.

Second, I drew on phenomenological philosophers to discuss a particular pattern in modern technology that involves an impoverishing of our world relations and an attenuating of our contact with earthly reality. To say that there is a dominant pattern or trend in modern technology is not to deny that there will always be contradictory tendencies, revolutionary possibilities, and unintended social consequences within this pattern. Thus when Woodbury argues that the appearance of social media completely invalidates everything I say about technology, I do not think he is making a very strong case. Indeed, the replacement of outdoor time with screen time has caused grave concern among ecopsychologists (e.g., Gomes, 2012) and others, prompting some to say that by allowing children to attach to their electronic media instead of to the earth our culture is conducting a vast and highly risky experiment in psychological development (Merrill & Schei, 2010). In short, I think Woodbury uses a single example in a one-sided way to make a strong claim that does not speak to the bigger picture.

Finally, in discussing the character of technology in the modern era I sought to relate it to the development of technology under capitalism. The priority driving technological change within the capitalist system is not the flourishing of life but rather the expansion of profit or the

flourishing of capital (Smith, 2010). The reality is that all technological commodities (including smart phones) are produced within a global political economic system that is increasingly geared against (human) life. To say that social media are useful for connecting people around the globe, sometimes in revolutionary ways, without at the same time highlighting the overall anti-ecological trend of technological change under the rule of capital, is again to make a weak case. It is also to ignore the historical reversal I discussed in the book in which technology no longer refers to an artful tending of or collaboration with the earth but rather to a destructive replacing of the earth’s creative powers with a purely instrumental human technology (think Monsanto). Rather than rejecting technology, then, I would argue for a postcapitalist form of technological development that supports the mutual flourishing of humans and earth. Permaculture-style technology seems to me a good direction in this respect.

Just as Woodbury does not address the need for critical distance, so too do Kahn and Hasbach’s thoughts on technology allow for little radical understanding. Kahn (2011) defines technology as human artifacts, with each new artifact typically introducing gains and losses. On the loss side, he is particularly concerned about a diminishment in the richness and variety of patterns of interaction with nature, and I agree with him there. Such an artifactual theory of technology, however, lacking an ontological or political economic perspective, sheds only dim light on the forces at play in shaping our social relations and contact with nature within modern technological existence. Furthermore, Kahn and Hasbach’s (2012) argument that we need to “own” that “we love technology” (p. 310) strikes me as psychologistic, reducing the question of technology to the owning of a feeling.

The Truth at the Margins

Woodbury regards my embrace of eco-socialism as unrealistic and marginalizing. As with science and technology, however, he does not detail any of my specific arguments. There is also again a larger context here that needs to be discussed, namely, the question more generally of ecopsychology’s marginality. To say that ecopsychology is inherently radical is by definition to say that it starts at or at least values the margins. I have, for example, made a point of defending ecopsychology’s attraction to marginal schools of psychology (depth, experiential, transpersonal) because these bring to the foreground modes of experience are typically avoided by mainstream anthropocentric psychology but that are central to the task of recollection (Fisher, 2012, 2013). Nonetheless, I think few of us wish to see ecopsychology remain a marginal field. The challenge, then, is to move from periphery to center without abandoning the truths discovered or preserved at the margins, communicating as we do so the reasonableness of the radical.

The mission of second-generation ecopsychology has largely been to overcome the marginality of first-generation ecopsychology. In launching the journal *Ecopsychology*, Doherty (2009) expressed appreciation for the first generation² but made a turn toward the psychological mainstream in order to remedy ecopsychology's "outsider status" (p. 3). Kahn and Hasbach (2012; Hasbach et al., 2012) go further, excluding from ecopsychology that which they think will make it unattractive to mainstream psychologists [I agree with Chalquist's (2013) comment on this in his book review]. With these specific moves from periphery to center, though, we must ask at what point it stops being ecopsychology. By abandoning the truth at the margins we abandon ecopsychology before we even know what it is.

Which leads me to the topic of eco-socialism. If ecopsychologists are to play a role in the transition to an ecological society, then we need a good critical understanding of our existing society; otherwise we will not perceive well the what, where, and how of the changes that need to happen. Yet because there has been such an extreme ideological taboo against questioning our capitalist social system, most of us know next to nothing about it, even as this system relentlessly expands and intensifies its exploitation of human and nonhuman nature. I have therefore found the eco-socialist literature invaluable in clarifying for myself what ecopsychology might be. Ecological Marxism offers a richness of interpretive insight, depth of analytic power, and sophistication of method not found elsewhere. The economist Richard Wolff (2012) asks along these lines, "Why in the world would a serious student of capitalism not consider Marx's arguments?" (p. 163). As a scholar dedicated to being faithful to life, why on earth would I avoid eco-socialism?

In my view a dialogue with eco-socialism *is* in fact realistic because it gets us closer to the reality of our subject matter. Woodbury agrees that from a "strictly academic standpoint" my "thesis has tremendous appeal" (2013, p. 154), but he thinks it is unworkable in practice. This begs the question of the relationship between theory and practice. For me, ecopsychology will make sense only if it aims to integrate psyche, nature, and society, in both theory and practice. In my new chapter, for example, I suggest that incorporating eco-socialist discourse into

ecopsychology will give us a much better understanding of our modern alienation from nature because alienation was one of Marx's central themes. I also said that drawing on eco-socialist ideas will help us to imagine what an ecological society might look like and so what our practice needs to aim at. Unlike Woodbury, then, I am strongly of the opinion that we need good theory to skillfully direct our practice. This is also necessary if we are to develop a uniquely ecopsychological politics, unlike the initiative that Woodbury identifies (STWR), which has no specific relationship to ecopsychology. I do not advocate simply signing on with eco-socialism but rather developing a form of politics that is itself ecopsychological, weaving together cultural regeneration and social justice/transformation, deep recollection of our earth-bound nature, and psycho-spiritual growth or human development.

I do agree that bringing radical ideas into the practical arena is a challenge. I was not, however, silent on this in my new chapter. There are too many points to address to give a proper reply to Woodbury, but my thoughts fall into two general categories. The first is that if eco-socialist ideas speak to common anxieties and longings and paint a hopeful vision of a more life-centered, cooperative world, and if ecopsychologists can integrate and translate these ideas in a way that uses the language of soul and nature, making them inviting and digestible to a relatively depoliticized audience, then I think that is a good way to go. Second of all, I think we are living in a moment of unprecedented openness to questioning the capitalist system and re-collecting the history of cooperative activity even in the USA. Woodbury may not believe this openness to be sufficient, but in my own experience I have found audiences increasingly receptive to basic Marxist ideas because they make such obvious sense of our times.

The Imaginary in Ecological Social Change

Woodbury's final criticism is that I do not identify the emerging new mythical narrative for our age. I certainly agree with him that a lack of imagination will fetter us. The question I would raise in this context, though, is how we imagine radical social change and, more specifically, the role of the imaginary³ in it. Woodbury imagines that if the right myth were to "go viral" it would catalyze rapid social change. This contrasts with the view of the Marxist geographer David Harvey (1996), who identifies the imaginary as only one moment or aspect of social reality among others, any one of which may play a more decisive role in social change depending on the conditions of the day. He identifies these other moments, all of which are by

²Indeed, I think he recognizes the marginal starting point of ecopsychology, noting elsewhere that

[i]n many ways, ecopsychology has served as a container for what goes missing or under-recognized in the anonymous, at-arm's-length nature of the scientific enterprise: emotion, personal meaning and transcendence, mystery, mysticism, despair and empowerment, critiques of the status quo, and eco-centric visions for a different society all together. (Doherty, 2010, p. 203)

³The imaginary refers here to the common background ways we imagine or understand our world and our place in it. It consists of images, stories, myths, values, ideas, fantasies, desires, norms, and so on.

definition interrelated, as discourse/language, power, institutions/rituals, material practices, and social relations. I mention Harvey's view not to give him the final word but rather to caution against the tending of myths and images alone (about which more below). Granted, however, that the imaginary is an essential component of ecological social change, what has been my approach?

In order to offer new images I have focused on interpreting the story that ecopsychology itself is trying to tell. Specifically, I have been working on the undoing of old stories (the myth of psychology, the myth of science, the myth of modernity, the myth of capitalism, etc.) so as to better hear the story ecopsychology wants to tell. And I have been gathering various images as elements of this ecopsychological story: humans as servants of nature or celebrants of creation, kinship with the more-than-human, an ensouled natural world, a transformed psychology, decolonizing the lifeworld, an ecological society, and so on. (Woodbury's claim to the contrary, I do not see ecopsychology's story as being primarily about survival.) In other words, I have been attempting to home in on what ecopsychology stands for and what it may uniquely contribute to the larger story of our times. As Woodbury himself notes, I see this as a work in progress.

A few words about Woodbury's proposal that the emerging mythic narrative of our time is radical interdependence, symbolized by the Earthrise photograph. I see no reason to privilege this particular framing. We could just as easily identify, say, the Great Turning story used by Joanna Macy and others (Macy & Johnstone, 2012), which has the advantage of containing the idea of an interdependent world while offering more of a narrative (the turn to an ecological or life-sustaining society). I am also not convinced that the view from outer space is most suited to ecopsychology, which after all is about countering the flight from matter, both the material earth and, I would suggest, the material conditions of our social relations. This is not to deny the urgent need for a unified, global perspective. But I think there is a kind of philosophical idealism at work in Woodbury's worldview and use of the Earthrise image. For to give ontological priority to the imaginary is to leave out of view the everyday materiality that is so much part of the story. In any case, I would here again mention the value of eco-socialism, for it is a movement that is transnational and global in scale but that keeps its feet on the ground.

To conclude, I do want to thank Zhiwa Woodbury for the opportunity of this exchange. It has helped me sharpen some of my ideas, and I hope it has been fruitful both for him and for those interested in the challenge of ecopsychology.

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