



## **Man-Made Motherhood and Other Sleights of Hand**

*A Review of:*

*Marxism and Domination: A Neo-Hegelian, Feminist, Psychoanalytic Theory of Sexual, Political, and Technological Liberation* by Isaac D. Balbus, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982

*Reviewed by*

**Patricia J. Mills**

*University of Toronto*

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The project of this book, to find a principle for unifying the liberation movements of the '80s which are rooted in the '60s, is an important one. And this principle is rightly identified by Balbus as the domination of nature: The domination of nature which grounds the process of objectification in contemporary society is shown to entail social and psychic consequences which result in ecological crises, the domination of woman by man, and repressive political forms in both capitalist and socialist societies. Instrumental reason (what Balbus calls the Instrumental mode of symbolization) is revealed as the specific form of reason through which nature is mastered. The unconscious roots of this instrumental logic or mode of symbolization are said to develop within a specific form of child-care in which women are the primary nurturers of infants. According to Balbus the domination of nature is a "collective neurosis" originating in the process of our separation from the mother, within "mother-monopolized" child-care, which leaves us unable to accept our own death. Thus, the problem of death (Norman O. Brown) rather than objectification (Marx) or sex (Freud) is the central one.

In his effort to theorize and generate new possibilities of critical consciousness Balbus points to the necessity for a transformation in child-rearing practices. Since the mode of child-rearing is seen to determine significantly our unconscious life, and thereby to establish the limits of our ability to transform society as adults, a non-dominating stance toward nature and others is to be achieved through shared heterosexual parenting. Leaning heavily on the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein, Balbus claims that we must have fathers as well as mothers involved in the care of infants if we are to eliminate the development of an unconscious process in which the need to deny the power of the mother entails the domination of the Other as woman, nature, or political adversary. Once both men and women share the responsibility for child-care the mother will no longer be seen as all-powerful, and with the dissolution of the first powerful (M)Other the logic of domination will disappear.

While the project of this book is a crucial one for those interested in radical social change, the theoretical analysis developed by Balbus for the political task is extremely problematic. We are led through an intellectual maze which begins with the work of Hegel and Marx, proceeds through Balbus' conception of Western or Neo-Marxism, Marxist-Feminism, Freudianism, Neo-Freudianism, Feminist-Freudianism, and a socio-historic account of child-rearing patterns. This maze, which is as notable for what is excluded as it is for what is included, is completed when we come back to a spineless and emaciated Hegel in the arms of a Freud fattened by feminism.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we are to have a Hegel without Absolute Knowledge or the movement from quantity to quality, and a Freud whose focus on the Oedipal father has been shifted to a concern with the pre-Oedipal mother.

Balbus' theoretical pastiche, which moves from logic to organic genetics, is meant to discredit Marx's focus on the mode of production (which accepts the logic of the domination of nature) and thereby to discredit the working class as the revolutionary agent of social change. Within his focus on the constitution of subjectivity Balbus argues that repressive technology, the state, and patriarchy are relatively autonomous forms of domination which should not be seen as automatically determined by the mode of production. Based on this analysis he claims that environmentalists, peace activists, and feminists, whose own upbringing has led them to create movements structured around the principles of participatory democracy, have superseded the working class as the revolutionary force. Thus, along with his argument for shared parenting among white, heterosexual, middle-class activists, he develops an argument for a coalition of the contemporary radical social movements. Those currently engaged in alternative movement struggles may find it best to turn immediately to Chapter 10 where the political thesis of the book is most explicitly stated and where it most clearly begins to fall down.

The impressionistic plundering of theories which goes on for the first 300 pages of this book not only raises the problem of eclecticism but makes detailed criticism difficult. There are many theoretical points with which I take issue; however, in order to encounter the central issue (the relation between the domination of nature, social domination, and psychic domination) I will limit my discussion to a concern with those theorists who are central to Balbus' project but who have been misrepresented in important ways. In particular I will focus on Balbus' account of Hegel, Marx, Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno. I will then examine the problems that I see emerging from Balbus' understanding of nature as they relate to the liberation struggles of the domination of women and blacks.

## Hegel

It is true, as Balbus shows, that the Hegelian problem of the relation between identity and difference is at the heart of the modern project to create a free and equal society. That is, within all the liberation struggles of the '80s there is now a search for a form of intersubjective recognition (a relation between self and Other) which allows for concrete differences but does not on that account render the relation unequal by dominating the Other. However, it is *not* true that we can, as Balbus suggests, simply extract parts out of Hegel's system in order to eliminate some (Absolute Knowledge, the analysis of the movement from quantity to quality) while we "apply" others (reciprocal recognition, the equation of objectification with alienation). In fact, this abstraction of parts from the whole is precisely what Balbus faults Neo-Marxists and Marxist-Feminists for doing with Marx's theory. The problem with such an approach for Balbus' analysis emerges most clearly in his failure to address the problem of the domination of nature *within* Hegel's theory.

A comprehensive rather than piecemeal approach to Hegel's philosophy reveals the way in which the attempt to include dialectically all oppositional "moments" presents us with an abstract negation in which nature itself, as immediate and contingent, cannot be fully comprehended in the logical Idea. Rather than offering a *new* relation to nature as Balbus claims, Adorno has shown that the notion of reconciliation in Hegel's philosophy presents us with a false identity of subject and object in which the sovereign power of thought is an expression of the domination of nature. For Adorno (and the liberation movements of the '80s) "the matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel . . . expressed his disinterest. They are the nonconceptual, the individual, the particular . . . What Hegel called 'lazy Existenz'."<sup>2</sup>

Balbus shows that the master-slave dialectic is only one brief moment in the Hegelian schema of the movement of Spirit toward universal self-knowledge. For Hegel it is neither work (as objectification) nor the dialectic of dependent-independent consciousness that is most significant. Rather, it is self-consciousness finding itself in an Other equal self which is required for the reconciliation that leads to universal self-consciousness. But what Balbus does not address is that, where Hegel attempted to ground intersubjectivity in the theory of recognition, his system requires that woman be confined to the family and denied self-consciousness. Woman is never a slave in Hegel's system as Balbus implies (p. 12); rather, woman is said to have a unique relation to nature in that she never knows the conscious risk of death and therefore never passes through negativity via a contradiction between herself and first nature. For Hegel, woman, like first nature, remains Other and

his system reproduces the domination of nature and the domination of woman *as* nature. If we are to begin and end with Hegel as Balbus advises, then surely we must consider the problems of the false identity of subject and object, the domination of nature, and the domination of woman *within* Hegel's system.<sup>3</sup>

### Marx

Having ignored the problem of the domination of nature in Hegel, Balbus does center on it in his discussion of Marx. Balbus describes the way Marx's focus on objectification, as the defining human activity through which liberation is to be realized, makes Marx a proponent of the domination of nature—especially in terms of the technological solution Marx offers to the problem of social domination. While the concern with the problem of the domination of nature in Marx is an important one there is a major sleight of hand made here in the dismissive attitude Balbus takes to Marx's early work—Balbus simply refuses to acknowledge the tension between the early and late Marx. He considers the 1844 Paris Manuscripts to be nothing more than the foreshadowing of the later analysis which sanctions the domination of nature.

Contrary to Balbus' analysis, Schmidt argues that Marx initially held to a dialectical conception of the relation between nature and human society which revealed "the mutual interpenetration of nature and society within the natural whole."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Marx's early understanding of communism focuses on labor as a process which "humanizes" nature as it "naturalizes" humanity. In the 1844 Manuscripts the schism between nature and human society, which is the "riddle of history," is to be healed in communism in such a way that nature is to be "resurrected." The process of objectification, as a transformation of nature, performed "in freedom" and "according to the laws of beauty" does not dominate nature but aids nature to realize itself. In the context of this dialectical understanding Marx focuses on the heterosexual love relation as the paradigmatic form of intersubjectivity: The love relation between woman and man is the realization of the ideal relation between self and Other. When a woman and a man come together conscious of their sexual need as a need for the Other, a need for another human being, then they are confirmed as both natural and social beings.

The later Marx moves away from his early concern with the intersubjective heterosexual love relationship, in terms of the recognition of the Other, to a concern with the intersubjective relation between workers. These forms differ in that the relation between workers in production is mediated by a process of objectification whereas the earlier man-woman relation is a direct relation. (Even if the Other is seen *as* an object in the direct man-woman relation it is not a relation mediated by a process of object-creating.) What is re-

quired for a critical analysis of Marx is not a dismissive attitude to the 1844 Manuscripts but a rethinking of the development of his analysis of intersubjectivity.

### **Marcuse**

It is precisely in the context of the issue of the relation between the early and late Marx that the work of Herbert Marcuse becomes important. Although Balbus discusses Marcuse's work quite extensively he does so only selectively and never refers to the fact that Marcuse's self-imposed project is to rescue the critique of the domination of nature in the early Marx as the foundation for all of Marx's later formulations. Thus, Balbus never refers to Marcuse's analysis of Marx in "The Foundations of Historical Materialism" where this project is explicitly carried out. And Balbus does not discuss the fact that in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* Marcuse situates the problem of the intersubjective recognition of difference within an analysis of the early Marx. For Marcuse, the free society is to be one in which an androgynous fusion of historically separated differences will occur yet a "natural" difference will remain. In other words, Marcuse, extrapolating from the early Marx, holds that a new social order could recognize different qualities such that, although the traditional masculine/feminine dichotomy would break down, society would remain divided by a fundamental natural/sexual difference (male/female) which could never be entirely overcome by social and historical transformations.

While Balbus ignores Marcuse's reliance on the early Marx he does give a compelling analysis of Marcuse's reformulation of Freud's instinct theory in *Eros and Civilization*. He challenges Marcuse's interpretation of the relation between Eros, Thanatos, and the Nirvana principle in an attempt to show the failure of Marcuse's analysis of the relation between alienated labor and the surplus repression of the instincts. What is most significant in this discussion is the fact that Balbus never mentions Marcuse's theory of the role of maternal eros. For Marcuse, the dialectical regression beyond surplus repression would be the return of the desire for liberation tied to the memory of infantile gratification rooted in the initial relation to the mother. The mother represents a utopian moment as she represents the Pleasure Principle against the father as the representative of the Reality Principle. Given the centrality of motherhood for the formation of consciousness in Balbus' theory, and his inclusion of Marcuse's work in general, the omission of Marcuse's concern with the role of maternal eros in *Eros and Civilization* is as curious as it is serious.

And last, but certainly not least, in Balbus' analysis of Marcuse (and Marx) there is no appreciation of the fact that the theory of qualitative change emerging from quantitative change (pp. 252-253, 292-

293), which Balbus finds theoretically bankrupt, is in fact a Hegelian formulation.

### Horkheimer and Adorno

The question of the domination of nature is the central question of the social critique most powerfully articulated by the first generation of the Frankfurt School (Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno). However, where Marcuse is concerned with the reconciliation with nature, Horkheimer and Adorno analyze the destructive tendencies of the revolt of nature and oppose any romantic idealization of nature. There are several important theoretical positions which Horkheimer and Adorno share with Balbus: They reject labor as the necessary source of liberation; they are concerned with a changed relation to nature in terms of the constitution of subjectivity; and they hold to a theory of the relative autonomy of the psyche, the family, and cultural and political spheres. But where Balbus wants to reclaim Hegel, the formulations of Horkheimer and Adorno show the necessity for departing from the Hegelian system. Balbus does not confront and refute Horkheimer and Adorno but chooses to dismiss them through a superficial reading of their work as a footnote to Hegel.

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It is true that Horkheimer and Adorno are indebted to Hegel and begin from his analysis in their studies of modern culture and fascism; however, they make an axial turn because of their sustained critique of the notion of reconciliation in Hegel's philosophy which creates a closed and uncritical system. Horkheimer and Adorno challenge the very ground of Balbus' project by revealing the logic of identity in Hegel's philosophy as part and parcel of the domination of nature.

### Feminism and the Domination of Nature

Accepting Hegel's analysis that objectification *equals* alienation, Balbus rejects Marx's analysis of reification which distinguishes between alienated and non-alienated forms of objectification. According to Balbus, the elimination of the domination of nature is to be achieved not by overcoming the alienated forms of objectification but by the creation of a "post-objectifying mode of symbolization" through the *transcendence* of objectification. The thesis of the transcendence of objectification is at first somewhat mysterious. One begins to wonder if there is to be any object-creation in the liberated world. Eventually we find out that, yes indeed, we are to become capable of a different relation to nature which allows us to transform nature but *not* for the goal of human survival (p. 374).

Within this thesis of the transcendence of objectification Balbus claims that we must move beyond the anthropomorphic stance in which humans see themselves as "the measure of all things" to "the

more modest, ecologically sound assumption that nature cannot be outwitted and that, in fact, 'Nature knows best' " (p. 365). Thus, within the post-Instrumental mode of symbolization:

Humans relate to nature not only in terms of their own purposes but also in terms of the different purposes inherent in *its* various entities; nature for the postobjectifying consciousness is no longer a pure means to exclusively human ends but becomes an end in itself. Put otherwise, nature regains the intrinsic significance that it lost within the Instrumental mode of symbolization; human interaction with nature once again becomes a meaningful experience .(p. 285)

This position does not seem to me very different from the concept of the reconciliation with nature in the early Marx and Marcuse. But that is not the most important issue here: rather, this position, which may be useful for the ecology, peace, and anti-nuclear movements, creates profound problems for feminists because "Nature" in its "wisdom" creates not only ecological balance but unwanted pregnancies.<sup>5</sup> To say that nature must become "an end in itself" hardly articulates a principle that can ground the feminist politics of abortion on demand. While Balbus avoids the issue of abortion, his position, in which the interpretation of the "end" or "telos" of nature is left in limbo, lends aid and comfort to the abstract pro-nature position that is gaining adherents within the peace, ecology, and anti-nuclear movements in the United States. Such a position has led some leftists to don "the seamless garment" of pro-life politics which entails an anti-abortion stand.<sup>6</sup>

Balbus' position also presents problems for the gay and lesbian movements. Homosexual relationships are not based on the procreative possibilities of the couple and in this sense may be seen as "anti-nature." And if Nature knows best then it follows that one is either born a homosexual or a lesbian, or these sexual orientations are "unnatural." This leaves no room for the analysis of lesbianism as a *political* choice which was an important development in the women's liberation movement. In addition, the artificial insemination of lesbians, which sometimes involves an attempt to secure a daughter rather than a son, may also be seen as "dominating nature."

Against Balbus' abstract understanding of nature as benign and omniscient what is required for a feminist analysis is a comprehensive understanding of nature which includes the aspect of mere nature "red in tooth and claw." Such an understanding can be found in the work of Theodor Adorno. For Adorno the origin of the domination of nature is a contradiction within nature itself: "The suppression of nature for human ends is a mere natural relationship." Here the domination of nature is seen as a consequence *of* nature. It is therefore only the memory of suffering that results from

domination which can animate the project of liberation—not “Nature itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Within feminism in general, and within Balbus’ analysis in particular, there has been a shift away from the politics of abortion (non-motherhood) to a concern with reclaiming motherhood. But the liberatory roots of the attempt to reclaim and reconstruct motherhood *began* with women who found themselves suffering from the alienation of enforced motherhood—women who found themselves pregnant when they did not want to be and were forced either to have an unwanted child or to risk death with an illegal abortion. The politics of reproduction cannot forget its origins: it cannot be reduced to a form of shared heterosexual parenting but must remain first and foremost woman’s right to choose *not* to reproduce, the right to *not* mother. In addition, such a politics must articulate the right to choose the form of birth (midwife/hospital) and to choose between heterosexual shared parenting and woman-only motherhood.

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The reclaiming of motherhood is a contentious issue within feminist theory. Balbus, following Dinnerstein and Chodorow, sees only negative features in human development due to the absence of the father from early child-care: Male domination of woman and the domination of nature are seen as reactions to the overwhelming and unbearable power of the mother experienced by the pre-verbal, pre-rational infant. This analysis, however, is quite different from the feminist ones in which female mothering is seen as the basis for the transformation of society. Feminists like Rich, Ruddick, Ryan, and Whitbeck see positive features in mother-raised children and want to use these features to ground a model of the non-dominating relation between self and Other. For them, equality and the non-dominating stance toward nature are not necessarily incompatible with the sexual division of labor. Rich, for example, sees woman-bonding or sisterhood as the solution to the oppressive character of motherhood as an institution. Thus, the central issue is perceived as the social domination of woman rather than the sexual division of labor or the process of gender differentiation. Even those who agree that shared heterosexual parenting is the goal, recognize that there are potential dangers. For example, men are not nurturers by training and so may not be able to give the infant the nurturance it requires; men are the source of most familial incest; and men may attempt to divest women of their children in situations in which women have little else.<sup>9</sup>

### **Black Liberation and the Domination of Nature**

Balbus begins his book by explaining that he is focusing on feminism, ecology, and participatory democracy to the exclusion of the black and gay/lesbian movements because he was a participant in

the first three movements but not in the other two. However, this disclaimer belies the foundational role of the black movement in the development of the counter-culture and the New Left in the United States. The infusion of black music and black politics into the white psyche was a major force in the radicalization process of the '60s: From the explicit sexuality of black music to the militant opposition of the Black Panthers, blacks were seen as saying something to whites and whites were listening. What developed was the New Left identification with blacks ("student as nigger") and a support for their struggles (as well as support for Third World struggles). It is simply not good enough to say one did not participate in the black movement. One must recognize the importance of black culture and black politics for *all* the liberation struggles of the '60s—especially if one's stated project is the search for a unification of these struggles.

What is central here is that Balbus develops an argument concerning the role of child-rearing patterns in the creation of radical activists that eliminates the possibility of understanding black activism. According to Balbus it was upper-middle class professional families, raising their children according to the child-centered patterns developed and expounded by Dr. Spock, that created the white radicals of the '60s.<sup>10</sup> But Black Panthers rarely came from such families.<sup>11</sup> It was not family dynamics but the unique configuration of institutionalized racism, which sent an inordinate number of blacks to fight and die in Vietnam, that created black activism in the '60s.

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In contradistinction to Balbus' theory, Horkheimer and Adorno develop a theory of the domination of nature in which social oppression rather than child-rearing patterns is shown to be central. In the *Dialectic of enlightenment* they reveal the connection between the domination of women and the domination of Jews in which women and Jews are seen *as* nature. They write:

Women and Jews can be seen not to have ruled for thousands of years . . . and their fear and weakness, the greater affinity to nature which perennial oppression produces in them, is the very element which gives them life. This enrages the strong who must pay for their strength with an intense alienation from nature, and must always suppress their fear.<sup>12</sup>

Here it is social domination which requires that the Other be kept alive and suppressed as nature; and the Other is seen to acquire a relation to nature that keeps alive the hope of liberation. This analysis could be extended to include the domination of blacks in a way that Balbus' analysis cannot.

## Summary

I have attempted to analyze this book on both a philosophical and a political level to do justice to the fact that Balbus is trying to unite theory with practice. He admits that feminism is the weak link in his argument for the unification of the feminist, ecology, and participatory democracy movements. However, he believes that this is because the prolonged pre-Oedipal identification between sons and mothers creates a radical male psyche able to support ecology and participatory democracy, but this psyche retains an unconscious need to dominate women. Against this claim, I believe that the political insufficiencies of this work are rooted in the theoretical eclecticism of an abstract pro-nature stance.

## Notes

1. Those familiar with the development of Western Marxism—especially the work of the Frankfurt School—and with the development of feminist theory will not find much that is new here. For those unfamiliar with these traditions the run through the intellectual maze will undoubtedly be overwhelming and impossible to assess. It is difficult to determine who the audience for this book is since it is neither a scholarly work (important works are cited from secondary sources) nor written with the sparkle and seductiveness that would make it a popular book.
2. Adorno, Theodor W. (1973). *Negative dialectics* (amended translation). New York: Seabury Press, p. 8.
3. See my article on “Hegel and ‘The Woman Question’: Recognition and Intersubjectivity.” In L.M.G. Clark and L. Lange (Eds.), *The sexism of social and political theory: Women and reproduction from Plato to Nietzsche*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979, pp. 74-78.
4. Schmidt, Alfred. (1973). *The concept of nature in Marx*. London: New Left Books, p. 80.
5. In fact, it is not only feminists who are affected by this abstract “pro-Nature” stance. For example, native groups who live by hunting wolves, seals, or bears now find themselves in conflict with urban-based groups who oppose all killing of animals. And of course, *Nature* creates famine, flood, and disease as well as ecological balance.
6. The conflict between an abstract pro-life politics and a feminist perspective was revealed most clearly in a recent issue of *The village voice* (July 16, 1985). See especially: Nat Hentoff’s article “How Can the Left Be Against Life?” (pages 18 and 20) and the rebuttal by Ellen Willis “Putting Women Back into the Abortion Debate” (pages 15, 16 and 24). See also the feminist critique by Katha Pollitt, “Hentoff, Are You Listening?,” in *Mother Jones* (Feb/March, 1985). The same debate is raging in the pages of *The nonviolent activist*, a publication put out by the War Resisters’ League. See the May-June and July-August issues, 1985.

According to a report in *Off our backs* (August-September, 1985, p. 7) a new anti-abortion group called Feminists for Life has been spawned by this debate.

7. Adorno, p. 179.
8. In my book, *Woman, nature and psych: The domination of nature in critical theory* (forthcoming 1986-87, Yale University Press), I explore this position from a feminist perspective.
9. See for example: Petchesky, R.P. (1980). "Reproductive Freedom: Beyond 'A Woman's Right to Choose'." In C.R. Stimpson and E. Spector Person (Eds.), *Women: Sex and sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co..  
Ruddick, S. (1984). "Maternal Thinking." In J. Trebilcot (Ed.), *Mothering: Essays in feminist theory*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allenheld.  
Ryan, J. "Psychoanalysis and Women Loving Women." In S. Cartledge and J. Ryan (Eds.), *Sex and love: New thoughts on old contradictions*. London: The Women's Press.  
Schweickart, P. (July, 1985). "Feminist Utopias—Going Nowhere?" In *The women's review of books*. Vol. 11, No. 10.  
Whitbeck, C. "Maternal Instinct" and "Afterword." In J. Trebilcot (Ed.), *Mothering*.  
Young, I.M. "Is Male Gender Identity the Cause of Male Domination?" In J. Trebilcot (Ed.), *Mothering*.  
The new emphasis on the reclaiming of motherhood in the United States often obscures the fact that there are still many unwilling mothers bearing unwanted children and women dying from illegal abortions all over the world.
10. Balbus has some difficulty trying to explain white female activism. While the sons of the revolution were mothered by child-centered women, the daughters it seems had "Supermoms": Mothers who were not only child-centered but successful career women. These mothers, however, were ambiguous about their success in the public world and tended to maintain the family as the primary source of their identity (pp. 394-395).
11. Nor did the Young Lords, Native Indians, or working class activists.
12. Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T.W. (1972). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Herder & Herder, p. 112.