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ARTICLE

The Roots of Sustainability

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Sustainability: Roots in the 1960s

For many of its proponents, the sustainability movement continues a long American tradition encompassing the simple rural virtues extolled by Thomas Jefferson, the romance of nature sung by Henry David Thoreau, the wilderness movement inspired by John Muir's walks into the High Sierras, the national forestry policies crafted by Gifford Pinchot, and the robust outdoorsmanship exemplified by Teddy Roosevelt and the Boy Scouts.

"Sustainability" connects to these antecedents, but has more direct roots in the turbulence of the 1960s and early 1970s, when middle-class reform mingled with upper middle-class radicalism. Moderate initiatives such as the civil rights movement, mainstream environmentalism, and the Great Society clashed or combined with the anti-Vietnam War movement and the campus-based New Left and revolutionary student movements. All of these in turn blended with the nihilistic, antinomian popular youth culture of the Woodstock generation.

Conservationism began long before the 1960s, but its modern environmentalist incarnation arose with the publication of Rachel Carson's

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polemical bestseller *Silent Spring* in 1962.[1] Carson was a matronly and evidently apolitical marine biologist who had enjoyed considerable previous success as a popular writer on wildlife and nature. In *Silent Spring*, she assessed how DDT and other pesticides harmed wildlife—especially birds, whose springtime chorus she claimed was going to go mute. The pesticides, said Carson, were unmonitored and indiscriminately spread, and would ultimately poison humanity as well by causing cancer and neurological disorders. Carson assailed the pesticide firms, accusing them of intentionally concealing DDT's harmful effects. In her view the profiteering companies were abetted by negligent government officials, who credulously accepted the industry's self-serving assurances. *Silent Spring* precipitated a national uproar, and prompted congressional inquiries that led to the banning of DDT a decade later.[2]

Doomsday Is Nigh

Carson set the mold for a new genre of writing that conjured fear of impending calamity. An echo of *Silent Spring* can be found in such subsequent episodes as the protests over the Seabrook, New Hampshire, Nuclear Power Plant, the depletion of atmospheric ozone over the Antarctic, or the current controversy over global warming. Sentimental regard for threatened wildlife was part of the picture, but it was the public's *fear* of slow, undetected poisoning through pollution of water resources and what would subsequently be dubbed "contamination of the food chain" that propelled the reaction to *Silent Spring*. Such fears were soon fed and intensified by a series of ecological incidents that, while not wholly unprecedented, had not previously been sensationalized by the national media. These included the major oil spills near the coast of Great Britain in 1967 and Santa Barbara, California, in 1969; the mercury poisoning of fishing waters near the Japanese factory town of Minamata from 1932 to 1968; the iconic Love Canal episode involving toxic waste dumping in the late 1970s; and the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant incident in 1979.

[1]Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

[2]In preparing this article, I am especially indebted to the groundbreaking work of Charles Rubin, whose 1994 book, *The Green Crusade: Rethinking the Roots of Environmentalism* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994), provides a useful overview and thoughtful critique of the environmentalist movement.

The "fear factor," spurred by the mainstream reformist environmental movement, accelerated to the point of panic by 1970, when the first nationwide Earth Day was observed, with broad bipartisan political endorsement. In their 1982 book *Risk and Culture*, anthropologist Mary Douglas and political scientist Aaron Wildavsky viewed this chain of events with perplexity:

> We begin with a sense of wonder. Try to read a newspaper or news magazine, listen to radio or watch television; on any day, some alarm bells will be ringing. What are Americans afraid of? Nothing much, really, except the food they eat, the water they drink, the air they breathe, the land they live on and the energy they use. In the amazingly short space of fifteen to twenty years, confidence about the physical world has turned into doubt. Once the source of safety, science and technology have become the source of risk. What could have happened in so short a time to bring forth so severe a reaction? How can we explain the sudden, widespread, across-the-board concern about environmental pollution and personal contamination that has arisen in the Western world in general and with particular force in the United States?[3]

Douglas, who had previously written books about fears of mystical pollution and rituals in various cultures that aimed at "purifying" people of imaginary contaminants, was primed to capture the oddity of the sudden American hysteria about invisible dangers lurking all around. The environmentalist movement was emerging as a modern American purity cult, perhaps as Douglas and Wildavsky suggest, connected to rising uncertainties about our shared national identity.

They argue that the environmentalist movement arose among people who saw themselves as anti-hierarchical, opposed to the prevailing structures of society and drawn to voluntaristic associations with weak internal authority, which they liken to "sects." These groups externalize their inner problems by projecting them onto nature:

> Global issues, not local ones, will serve their purpose best...Sects need to speak on behalf of the whole of mankind, not for a few millions. Physical nature is their best substitute for God, not only because nature

[3]Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 10.

> is powerful and unpredictable. The bias against elaborate institutional forms makes nature the appropriate good counterpart to defend against bad central society.[4]

In Douglas and Wildavsky's view, the environmentalist movement gained its grip because of the weakening of America's "integrative" institutions—political parties, trade unions, and churches that mediated between citizen and state—beginning in the 1960s. Environmentalist sectarians exploited but also accelerated this weakening by using "government to impose restrictive regulations on their enemies." The odd position of environmentalist advocates is that they are constantly "invoking government [but] are not inclined to respect it." Thus the environmentalist movement testifies to a diffuse, even "global" concern for the world, while eroding the capacity of Americans to feel part of an actual nation.[5]

But this runs a bit ahead. We return to Carson.

Bad Business

Many strident social critiques that followed *Silent Spring* also picked up Carson's theme that environmental degradation should be attributed to "systemic" factors, not simply to random neglect or misconceived public policies. Carson excoriated a profit-driven business culture that compromised the critical judgment of entomologists, who suppressed their apprehensions about environmental destruction rather than jeopardize prospects for corporate research funding. Although she advocated closer regulation of the chemical industry and the use of pesticides, Carson also emphasized the need for a fundamental reorientation of the public understanding of nature and humanity's place within it. She insisted that the natural world was to be appreciated, respected, and preserved, rather than simply harnessed to the needs of an ever-expanding industrial economy.

Ironically, banning DDT, for which Carson's work was directly responsible, probably caused millions of needless deaths—especially in poorer tropical nations where it had effectively controlled the malaria-transmitting mosquito populations. Sustainability advocates, who insist that policies must always be implemented with a view to their ecological consequences, seem

[4]Ibid., 125.

[5]Ibid., 173.

not to have entertained second thoughts, and Carson's glowing legacy stands untarnished. She is memorialized in the Rachel Carson Trails Conservancy, a ship used for marine research, a scholarship program for high school seniors, and a series of National Audubon Society awards.

Carson's time in the sun was bright but brief; she died of cancer in April 1964. Environmentalism, however, emerged as a powerful, popular, politically bipartisan reform movement. Over the next decade, Congress enacted a steady stream of conservationist and remedial measures with no significant opposition: the 1964 Wilderness Act, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act both in 1970, the 1972 Clean Water Act, and the 1973 Endangered Species Act.[6] When the first Earth Day was observed on April 22, 1970, it drew mass participation rather than simply the usual college students, illustrating the extent to which environmentalism—the reformist, correctional variety, at least—had achieved legitimacy among the larger public. International approbation came in 1972, when the United Nations convened the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the first of numerous similar gatherings, including the World Commission on Environment and Development, whose canonical 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, made the now-ubiquitous term "sustainability" familiar to the international *cognoscenti*.[7]

Environmental crisis fired the imaginations of obscure and popular writers alike and an avalanche of new books appeared after *Silent Spring*. Expanding on themes adumbrated by Carson, these works often developed comprehensive macro-theories, linking environmental pollution to a continuum of interrelated social crises and long-term historical trends—"The System," as it was subsequently dubbed in the ideological shorthand of the 1960s.

The Fringe

But one figure slightly anticipated Carson. About six months before *Silent Spring* appeared, Murray Bookchin, a fringe-left author and political activist

[6]A useful timeline of "Milestones in Environmental Protection" can be found at http://www.factmonster.com/spot/earthdaytimeline.html#1930.

[7]Gro Harlem Brundtland et al., *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). A full version of the report is also available at Center for a World in Balance (http://worldinbalance.net/home.php), http://worldinbalance.net/intagreements/1987-brundtland.php.

writing under the pseudonym Lewis Herber, published *Our Synthetic Environment*.[8] The book was little noted at the time. The former Marxist/Stalinist/anarchist/communitarian writer argued that the despoliation of the environment was inevitably connected to other social maladies. Impressively prolific, Bookchin stuck with this theme for decades, and achieved some notice in radical circles for his 1964 essay, "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," in which he coined the term "social ecology."[9] Bookchin's intellectual footprints are hard to trace. His actual influence seems to have been marginal, notwithstanding his own claims and those of a remnant of tenacious admirers, who view him as the conceptual founder of the environmentalist movement.

A self-proclaimed "utopian," Bookchin attributed environmental destruction, as he did all other social ills, to the existence of "hierarchy" at every level of society, whether between governments and citizens, employers and employees, men and women, students and teachers, or parents and children. Bookchin dismissed the mainstream environmental movement, with its reliance on centrally administered bureaucratic regulation, as elitist and authoritarian. Late in life, he also moved away from anarchism, troubled by what he considered excessive individualism at the expense of community. A reflexively contrarian disposition seems to have kept Bookchin preoccupied with recondite doctrinal disputations on the fringes of the American Left, including such radical environmentalists as Earth First! whom he denounced as misanthropist primitives.[10] Although Bookchin wrote extensively and in advance of many others about "social ecology," he is chiefly useful as a barometer for gauging sectarian strife on the Left.

His indirect influence, however, cannot be dismissed. The sustainability movement today has deep affinity for the Bookchinite logic of treating "ecology" as a rubric for pursuing radical forms of "social justice." Possibly this is just a case of parallel intellectual evolution, but Bookchin's notion of social ecology is now common currency. "What literally defines social ecology as 'social,'" he explained in a 1993 essay,

> is its recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Conversely,

[8]Murray Bookchin [Lewis Herber, pseud.], *Our Synthetic Environment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

[9]Murray Bookchin, "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," published in *Comment*, the author's newsletter, in 1964.

[10]See Earth First! (http://earthfirst.com/).

> present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within society. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious dislocations we face today—apart, to be sure, from those produced by natural catastrophes.[11]

Whether Bookchin has a more secure place in this history of an idea is hard to say.

Blaming Christianity, Re-feeling Destiny

A much more direct influence on the emerging movement was UCLA historian of science Lynn White, whose striking and widely influential thesis, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," was published in 1967. White saw the ultimate wellsprings of the environmental crisis in Western Latin Christianity and, by implication, in Western civilization itself:

> We would seem to be headed toward conclusions unpalatable to many Christians. Since both science and technology are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that viewed historically, modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology—hitherto quite separate activities—joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a heavy burden of guilt.[12]

Like Carson, White called for a reorientation of the public worldview, albeit far grander: nothing less than the drastic reformulation of the foundational doctrines of Christianity, which, White believed, provided the intellectual impetus and theological justification for the subjugation and abuse of the natural world by mankind:

> Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our

[11]Murray Bookchin, "What Is Social Ecology?" in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman and J. Baird Callicott (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), http://greenfrombelow.wordpress.com/murray-bookchin-what-is-social-ecology/.

[12]Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, issue 3767, March 10, 1967, 1206, http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm.

> ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel [*sic*] our nature and destiny.[13]

Still others—especially Barry Commoner, a biologist and long-time anti-nuclear political activist, and Paul Ehrlich, a Stanford entomologist who had previously made a career studying butterflies—emulated Rachel Carson's popular success and amplified the fear and alarmism conveyed by *Silent Spring*. Ehrlich's 1968 neo-Malthusian tract, *The Population Bomb*, was frantically shrill and apocalyptic, attributing environmental destruction to worldwide overpopulation and forecasting horrific consequences for the near future, especially mass starvation:

> The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s, the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now. At this late date, nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate... population control is the only answer.[14]

Ehrlich placed the "population bomb" at the core of every aspect of the environmental crisis, which, beyond his anticipated food shortages, augured widespread mortality and suffering:

> [I]n the long view, the progressive deterioration of our environment may cause more death and misery than any conceivable food-population gap. And it is just this factor, environmental deterioration, that is universally ignored by those most concerned with closing the food gap...the causal chain of the deterioration is easily followed to its source. Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticide, multiplying contrails, inadequate sewage treatment plants, too little water, too much carbon dioxide—all can easily be traced to *too many people*.[15] (emphasis in original)

[13]Ibid., 1207.

[14]Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.1968), prologue.

[15]Ibid., 66–67.

It's All Interconnected

Barry Commoner's 1971 bestseller, *The Closing Circle*, also expressed a sense of mounting urgency, if not quite of the imminent catastrophe forecast by Ehrlich:

> To survive on Earth, human beings require the stable, continuing existence of a suitable environment. Yet the evidence is overwhelming that the way in which we now live on Earth is driving its thin, life-supporting skin, and ourselves with it, to destruction.[16]

Reflecting what would become a recurrent theme among later writers, the environment in Commoner's depiction was infinitely delicate and complex, easily "unbalanced" due to the human activity now threatening it. In the first of his famous "four laws of ecology," he asserted that "everything is connected to everything else": pollution of one sector of the environment inevitably affects all other sectors.[17]

It doesn't take much to realize that Commoner's first law of ecology is trivially true if it is true at all. It skirts the hard work of determining what particular things most importantly influence other things. The "interconnectedness" mantra is one of those pseudo-profound ideas; it seems to say something important, but dissolves under scrutiny.

Unlike many of his fellow environmentalists, Commoner did not reject technology outright. Technology per se, he argued, did not automatically lead to environmental disaster and might be useful in correcting the effects of past industrial pollution. Unfortunately, new agricultural and industrial technologies developed since World War II were both highly productive—and profitable—and also immensely harmful to nature. For Commoner, like Rachel Carson and many social critics not immediately concerned with environmental issues, unless strong external pressure were brought to bear on corporate America's immovable fixation on short-term profits the environmental emergency would remain unaddressed.

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[16]Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 14.

[17]Ibid. Commoner's Four Laws of Ecology:

1. Everything is connected to everything else.
2. Everything must go somewhere.
3. Nature knows best.
4. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

Both Ehrlich and Commoner proposed comprehensive, even coercive policy responses. Ehrlich, for example, asserted:

> Our position requires that we take immediate action at home and promote effective action worldwide. We must have population control at home, hopefully through a system of incentives and penalties, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail. We must use our political power to push other countries into programs which combine agricultural development and population control. And while this is being done we must take action to reverse the deterioration of our environment before population pressure permanently ruins our planet.[18]

Making the case for the absolute emergency necessity of population control would require harnessing the mass media and educational institutions to the Herculean task of transforming public perception. This meant a crucial advocacy role for higher education:

> [A college professor] should immediately use his influence in every way possible within and outside of the university to get the fire crews on the line. The population crisis must be an integral part of his teaching—it is pertinent to *every* subject. He must use the prestige of his position in writing letters to whomever he thinks he can influence most. If he is in English or drama, he may be able to write novels or plays emphasizing near-future worlds in which famines or plagues are changing the very nature of mankind and his societies.[19]

The attempt to make higher education into an engine of political advocacy, of course, had begun earlier with the New Left's 1962 Port Huron Statement and the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement,[20] but the attempt to merge hijacking the curriculum with radical environmentalism was new. Interestingly, Ehrlich's call to make "the population crisis...integral...to every subject" closely resembles the position of today's sustainability advocates.

Although his tone was less frenzied than Ehrlich's, Commoner also insisted that drastic changes in life habits—especially consumption levels

[18]Ehrlich, *Population Bomb*, prologue.

[19]Ibid., 191–92.

[20]See "Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962," http://www.campusactivism.org/server-new/uploads/porthuron.htm. For University of California materials on the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, visit http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificafsm.html.

and, indeed, the whole orientation of economic production—were imperative. He called for the creation of extensive regulatory and planning policies that would focus on environmental necessities, irrespective of corporate ambitions. It is interesting, if not quite logical, that Commoner also linked the redress of the overwhelming environmental emergency with the concomitant elimination of other long-standing social ills:

> To resolve the environmental crisis, we shall need to forgo, at last, the luxury of tolerating poverty, racial discrimination, and war. In our unwitting march toward ecological suicide, we have run out of options. Now that the bill for the environmental debt has been presented, our options have been reduced to two: either the rational, social organization of the use and distribution of the earth's resources, or a new barbarism.[21]

Celebrity Environmentalism

Both *The Closing Circle* and *The Population Bomb* provoked sensational responses and their authors became lecture circuit celebrities. Commoner continued his political activism and eventually ran for president as the candidate of the Citizens' Party in 1980; Ehrlich was feted on *The Tonight Show*. The media attention illustrates the sheer star power that environmentalism has always commanded, beginning with the publication of *Silent Spring*. Academics would not ordinarily appear as *Tonight Show* guests—except possibly to stand in as foils—but Paul Ehrlich rated forty-five minutes of uninterrupted advocacy on the program.

Hollywood soon began to turn out cinematic depictions, often of dubious scientific or historical reliability, that vividly amplified the nightmarish visions of the environmentalists. *Soylent Green* (1973) imagines food shortages so severe that the government recycles corpses as comestibles. A self-enclosed utopian community executes people on their thirtieth birthdays to keep the population within Ehrlichian boundaries in *Logan's Run* (1976). In *The China Syndrome* (1979), evil capitalists build a nuclear power plant on an active fault zone, while a lone citizen blows the whistle on Pacific Gas and Electric for contaminating the water supply with hexavalent chromium in *Erin Brockovich* (2000). And the Northern Hemisphere is plunged into a full-

[21]Commoner, *Closing Circle*, 13.

scale ice age overnight as the consequence of human heedlessness in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).

The public was also treated to the purportedly documentary productions of former vice-president and recent Nobel Prize laureate Al Gore (*An Inconvenient* Truth, 2006) and actor Leonardo Di Caprio (*The 11th Hour*, 2007), as well as the regular environmental advocacy programming of Public Television. Since 1989, the Environmental Media Association has sponsored high-profile, celebrity-oriented activism, complete with an annual awards ceremony:

> The Environmental Media Association believes that through television, film and music, the entertainment community has the power to influence the environmental awareness of millions of people....EMA mobilizes the entertainment industry in educating people about environmental issues, which in turn, inspires them to take action.[22]

An ominous and prescient note *sed contra* was sounded in 1971 by an isolated reviewer of *The Closing Circle* in *Life* magazine:

> The ecological crisis which Commoner so lucidly outlines is, in the end, less concerned with biology than with the politics of regulation. To satisfy his demands for a self-perpetuating society, we apparently need a bureaucratic control mechanism that doesn't sound much like a democracy. Almost all the things that make our machine civilization work—even the construction of universities and hospitals—are inimical to the environment in one way or another.[23]

Environmentalism as a reform movement enjoyed broad public and congressional support, and doubtless addressed some ecological realities caused by industrial pollution, even if popular fears were also significantly exaggerated, as Douglas and Wildavsky concluded. But more significantly, it also embodied the conceptual seeds of imperial overreach, authoritarianism (a frequent complaint of the tenaciously querulous Murray Bookchin), and

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[22]Environmental Media Association (http://www.ema-online.org/), About EMA, http://www.ema-online.org/about_us.php.

[23]Franklin Russell, "The Totalitarian Ecologist," *Life*, November 5, 1971, 18, http://books.google.com/books?id=FkAEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA18-IA2&lpg=PA18-IA2&dq=Franklin+Russell,+%E2%80%9CThe+Totalitarian+Ecologist&source=bl&ots=1Lwm1HhFur&sig=2f0qmqLUv7xjCYoGPUYmUUSrle4&hl=en&ei=0GsjS5WGKMXYlAepycGCCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAgQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Franklin%20Russell%2C%20%E2%80%9CThe%20Totalitarian%20Ecologist&f=false.

the insistence on wholesale social transformation—tendencies in full bloom among the intellectual and social movements dominating the academy.

Today's sustainability movement incorporates virtually all of the major conceptual apparatus of the environmentalist movement from Carson to Commoner: the sense of impending doom from largely invisible sources, the call for immediate action, the finger of blame pointed at corporate capitalism, the desire to "reeducate" the public and change tastes and patterns of consumption, the metaphysical postulate that "everything is connected to everything else," the gripping fear of overpopulation and limited resources, and the success in giving this whole *gestalt* a celebrity glow. But if all this was part of environmentalism as far back as the 1960s, what makes today's movement different?

Is sustainability just repackaged environmentalism?

Environmentalism and the New Left

Environmentalism quickly secured permanent residence on many campuses. Colleges and universities were already teeming with student activism; it was a small step to link the activist spirit to a new "urgent and altruistic" cause. The University of Colorado Boulder established an environmental affairs office in 1970. The same year, the University of California, Irvine, established the nation's first "School of Social Ecology"—deploying Bookchin's term without explicitly acknowledging its radical source—and Dartmouth College created its "Environmental Studies Program." In fact, dozens of colleges and universities embraced the new vogue in 1970 and shortly after.

Sometimes the activist spirit was manifest in self-dramatizing theatrics. Right after Earth Day in 1970, students at San Jose State University purchased a brand new Ford Maverick, put a box of grapes in the back seat to enunciate their solidarity with migrant farm workers, and interred both car and grapes in a campus grave—thus accentuating their opposition to automotive air pollution.

Student activism in the 1960s culminated in widespread violence. The movement had taken an angry, often irrational tone; Vietnam protests had turned to burning ROTC buildings, bombing research laboratories on some campuses, occasional murders, the riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, and the emergence of the terrorist Weather Underground Organi-

zation.[24] Campus environmentalism, by contrast, was far tamer. It induced symbolic protests, not riots, and quickly proved amenable to institutionalization. Protesters no sooner hoisted their placards than they were invited inside to develop new degree programs. Universities were nevertheless in a curiously ambivalent position. They were bases for, but also sometimes targets of, student radicals and their faculty allies, who still accused them of complicity in the Vietnam War, of serving as the educational adjunct for corporate rapacity, and of callous indifference to racism, sexism, classism, and any number of other social ills.

Recall Commoner's first law of ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else." It may not have been obvious that concerns about air and water pollution connected to opposition to Richard Nixon's Southeast Asia policies. After all, Nixon too supported strong environmental regulations. But in late-night dorm room chats or at faculty colloquia, it all made woozy sense that the structures of authority that served the interests of corporate greed wrapped together exploitation of the earth and exploitation of mankind.

But this was not yet the "sustainability movement." Most of the ingredients of the sustainability concept were present, but not the idea. Environmentalism still focused on repairing and protecting the environment from wrongful and harmful forms of exploitation. It had not yet seized the notion of an all-encompassing preventative regime in which present-day consumption had to be judged, moment by moment, against an imagined and imaginary future.

The widespread abandonment of even minimal strictures respecting the free speech rights of others in favor of full-throated advocacy was a crucial element in the campus absorption of environmentalism. For the first time, forces *within* academic precincts imperiled academic freedom and free speech, as classes were regularly disrupted, visiting speakers shouted down or even physically assaulted, and corporate recruiters and ROTC programs driven from many campuses.[25] Political advocacy became a permanent

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[24]Started in 1969 as a faction of Students for a Democratic Society, Weatherman—known as the Weathermen and later as the Weather Underground Organization—was an American radical Left organization whose goal was to create an underground revolutionary party for the violent overthrow of the American government and the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship.

[25]For a contemporary account of these developments still worth reading, see Nathan Glazer, "Student Politics and the University," *The Atlantic*, July 1969, http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/196907/glazer. See also Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) and Theodore J. Lowi, *The Politics of Disorder* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

aspect of classroom instruction, especially in the humanities and social sciences, as student activists and sympathetic professors in courses on Shakespeare, foreign policy, or statistics held forth on Vietnam, urban racial tensions, and, of course, environmental issues—all part of "the System," in the idiom of the time.

Demands for "relevance" in the classroom led to the swift collapse of traditional curricula and the equally swift adoption of new offerings—some actually devised by committees of undergraduates—that focused exclusively on contemporary social controversies, and sometimes even offered academic credit for political activism. All of this was soon followed by the emergence of women's studies, black studies, Chicano studies, peace studies, Native American studies, and eventually the enveloping doctrine of multiculturalism, all of which openly touted their ideological orientations. Where did one situate environmentalism within this crucible?

For some contemporaries within The Movement, environmental degradation blended easily as an obvious and "interconnected" component of the manifold evils of American capitalism, as propounded in *The Greening of America*, Charles A. Reich's bestselling notional paean to the era:

> The impact of technology, market and capitalism is written on our landscape, our culture, our faces. Perhaps the landscape shows it most vividly. In all societies prior to the modern, no matter how diverse in other ways, there existed an essential harmony between the people and the land, a harmony in which nature was not violently altered or violated. Modern society makes war on nature. A competitive market uses nature as a commodity to be exploited—turned into profit. Technology sees nature as an element to be conquered, regulated, controlled.[26]

Elsewhere, the reception of environmentalism was lukewarm, if not hostile. Journalist William Tucker dismissed the movement as a fetish of latter-day aristocrats chiefly concerned with the preservation of their country retreats.[27] In 1971, the late Richard John Neuhaus, then a Lutheran minister and civil rights activist (a major manifestation of "social justice" in the early 1970s), accused environmentalists of sacralizing nature and of a

[26]Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1971), 28.

[27]William Tucker, *Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Press, 1982).

narcissistic conservationism toward their cherished wilderness habitats at once inaccessible and useless to the urban poor with whom he associated daily.[28] The environmental movement, Neuhaus complained, had been co-opted by the very corporations most directly responsible for despoiling nature, and further enjoyed the support of the "reactionary" Nixon administration. Population controllers like Ehrlich, moreover, were simply a re-packaged version of the early twentieth-century eugenics movement, camouflaged by the noble mission of saving the world from overpopulation. Neuhaus issued a fervent plea that the mainstream leftist and liberal reform groups resist the lure of an elitist, self-absorbed environmentalism, lest they be unconscionably diverted from the pressing civil rights and anti-poverty reforms that had far superior claim on their efforts.

Neuhaus's critique is good evidence that environmentalism had not yet become "sustainability." When it did emerge, the sustainability doctrine offered a way to *synthesize* environmentalism with civil rights themes and anti-poverty programs. But in 1971, these themes appeared to Neuhaus to be pulling in opposite directions.

New Left activists—who also took a "systemic" view of the ills of American society—seemed unsure of how to react to the surging environmental movement. They had common ground if they wanted it: Rachel Carson and especially Barry Commoner had indicted profit-driven American corporations, as did the New Left's foundational ideological manifesto, the 1962 Port Huron statement. Likewise, environmentalists and New Leftists conjured a web of "interconnected" social ills. They also shared an often vehement disdain for Western civilization: inspired by such authors as Frantz Fanon, the New Left despised the West for its imperialism and plunder of the third world; environmentalists, reflecting the ideas of Lynn White, charged Western Christianity with providing theological cover for the exploitation and ruin of nature by mankind. With so much in common, why did the movements not immediately coalesce? Perhaps because the New Left generally rejected piecemeal "liberal" reformist measures and advocated a frontal "revolutionary" assault on The System. Environmentalism was, by contrast, an ameliorating movement.

[28]John Richard Neuhaus, *In Defense of People: Ecology and the Seduction of Radicalism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), see especially chap. 4 and 7.

Even so, a number of such self-proclaimed New Leftists as journalist James Ridgeway saw environmentalism as a potentially valuable ally that offered

> different ways of attacking concentrated corporate power, the source of pollution, thereby opening up the possibilities of revolutionary change, and for reorganizing society and communities on different principles.[29]

A major obstacle for others, however, was that environmentalists were frequently blinkered by narrow, locally-oriented conservationism, and lacked the conceptual "big idea" through which the destruction of natural habitats could ultimately be explained. As a result, they often acted

> in the most fragmentary ways, attacking isolated problems and not complex patterns of social and political behavior. They save a nature area and fail to address the entire land use patterns of that region. They save a seashore from development when that seashore is threatened with the biological destruction of wildlife. As such, their victories are at best stop gaps, always provisional....Most important, the "new breed of young conservationists" fail to see that the crisis of the environment truly is but a reflective of the crisis of this culture itself, of the values, institutions, and procedures which have for some 200 years systematically guided the slaughter of human and all other forms of life at home and abroad.[30]

The same author, however, also chastised his colleagues as "equally derelict" for failing to appreciate the revolutionary potential in environmentalism:

> The New Left has at this point made little serious effort to understand or relate to the politics of ecology. While the battles in the streets appear more pressing and more direct, it ought to be understood that unless something very basic and very revolutionary is done about the continued destruction of our life support system, there may well be no wind to weather in the near future....[T]he task of ecological radicals is to continually raise those issues which seek to patch up the status quo from those who struggle for basic transformation.[31]

The New Left in the 1970s splintered, and its splinter groups argued endlessly over what to do next. Some of those groups attached themselves to

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[29]James Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970), 208.

[30]Barry Weisberg, "The Politics of Ecology," in *The Ecological Conscience: Values for Survival*, ed. Robert Disch (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Incl., 1970), 155.

[31]Ibid., 17.

environmentalism, others to ACORN-style urban activism, others to electoral politics, and still others to revolutionary agitation.

The "Kaleidoscopic Lens"

There seems to have been no precise moment at which the diverse strands of sixties social activism melded into the "sustainability" movement, no masterwork of intellectual synthesis that united its concurrent but distinct themes. Obviously, environmentalism was "present at the creation" and gathered momentum in company with the other social currents comprising The Movement. The works of Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, but especially Barry Commoner and Charles A. Reich—like the low-profile Murray Bookchin—stressed the notion that environmental degradation and other persistent social problems were "interconnected": it was indeed necessary to "clean up," but far-reaching measures involving comprehensive social reform and the basic reorientation of public beliefs were also deemed indispensable.

Whatever the "revolutionary" potential of environmentalism, activists seized on its capacity for frightening the public and mobilizing broad political support. In 1977, for example, the newly organized Mobilization for Survival consciously sought to link public fear of radioactive contamination by nuclear power plants and the cold war nuclear arms competition.[32] The combination proved successful, thanks in part to the propagandistic magnification of the relatively minor Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident in 1979. The attempt to harness public anxieties over nuclear power to build support for nuclear disarmament made no substantive sense. The "nukes" in both cases employed nuclear fission, but there the resemblance stopped, except in leftist imagery. As one activist publication put it in 1980:

> The best handle we have to date for focusing public attention on the larger question of the nuclear arms race is with the apparently more immediate and visible issue of nuclear power.[33]

The psychology of fear generated by apprehensions regarding nuclear power plants was supposed to be transferrable to nuclear weapons

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[32]Mobilization for Survival was a coalition of groups that came together after the end of the Vietnam War seeking to link opposition to nuclear power, the nuclear arms race, and the antiwar movement in general.

[33]Editorial, New Alchemy Institute (now the Green Center), *Journal of the New Alchemists* 6 (1980), quoted in Rael Jean Isaac and Erich Isaac, *The Coercive Utopians: Social Deception by America's Power Players* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway Books, 1985), 74.

because both threatened "survival." As Amory Lovins, a long-time environmentalist and current chairman of the Rocky Mountain Institute,[34] argued in 1981:

> We cannot embrace one, while abhorring the other; we must learn, if we want to live at all, to live without both.[35]

Environmentalism also spawned numerous variants. "Ecofeminism," first elaborated in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne, argued that ecological destruction grew out of male oppression of women. Just as men had exploited and dominated women throughout history, so did they also exploit and dominate nature.[36] In the view of ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century amounted to the subordination of Mother Nature by male scientists and entrepreneurs:

> Two new ideas, those of mechanism and of the domination and mastery of nature became core concepts of the modern world. An organically oriented mentality in which female principles played an important role was undermined and replaced by a mechanically oriented mentality that either eliminated or used female principles in an exploitative manner. As Western culture became increasingly mechanized in the 1600s, the female earth and virgin earth spirit were subdued by the machine.[37]

Other ecofeminists argued that feminism provided the common portal for activist groups:

> While feminism is a primary entry point, women and men also come to ecofeminism through environmentalism, alternative spirituality, animal

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[34]Rocky Mountain Institute (http://www.rmi.org/rmi/) "is an independent, entrepreneurial nonprofit think-and-do tank™ that drives the efficient and restorative use of resources. Established in 1982 by Amory and Hunter Lovins, what began as a small group of colleagues focusing on energy solutions has since grown into a broad-based Institute with approximately 90 full-time staff, an annual budget of nearly $15 million, and a global reach," http://www.rmi.org/rmi/About+RMI.

[35]Amory Lovins, quoted in Isaac and Isaac, *Coercive Utopians*, 74, from a piece that appeared in the Spring 1981 *Amicus Journal* (now *On Earth*), a publication of the Natural Resources Defense Council. The quote is attributable, by some accounts, to the famous oceanographer, Jacques Cousteau: "Human society is too diverse, national passions too strong, human aggression too deep-seated for peaceful and warlike atoms to stay divorced for too long. We cannot embrace one while abhorring the other; we must learn, if we want to live at all, to live without both."

[36]See, for example, *Ecofeminism*, by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (New York: Zed Books, 1993).

[37]Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980; New York: HarperOne, 1990), 2.

> rights, and other progressive affiliations. The kaleidoscopic lens of ecofeminism includes a prepatriarchal historical analysis, an embracement of spirituality, and a commitment to challenging racism, classism, imperialism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, anthropocentrism (i.e., human supremacism), speciesism and other forms of oppression.[38]

Environmental activism also mixed with identity politics in the emerging "environmental justice" movement, which began to gather momentum during the early 1980s. In October 1991, a manifesto that emphasized the special connection between environmental deterioration and racial oppression emerged from the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, DC.[39] This manifesto embraced virtually all "social justice" issues from racism to health care to nuclear testing to multiculturalism. As indicated in the preamble to its seventeen *Principles of Environmental Justice*:

> **WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR**, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice...[40]

[38]Colleen McGuire and Cathleen McGuire, Ecofeminist Visions Emerging, EVE online (http://eve.enviroweb.org/), "What Is Ecofeminism Anyway?" http://eve.enviroweb.org/what_is/index.html.

[39]For details on the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, see http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/EJSUMMITwlecome.html, at the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University (http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/Welcome.html).

[40]See http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html.

The reference to Mother Earth in this preamble should not be dismissed as rhetorical fluff. Many ecofeminists and other environmentalists deify the earth. The point is elaborated a little later in the document:

> Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.[41]

Environmentalism influenced a slew of other social protest movements, including ecosocialism, ecomarxism, ecotheology and ecospychology, as elaborated in Theodore Roszak's 1992 *The Voice of the Earth*.[42] By the late 1970s, a radical fringe impatient with what they judged to be the slow pace of institutionalized reform began to indulge more strident rhetoric, including calls for violence. Earth First!—the exclamation point is part of its name—took the lead in this regard.[43]

Ultimately, the most influential component of the environmental fringe was "deep ecology," a term coined in 1972 by Norwegian philosopher and outdoorsman Arne Naess. Naess acknowledged his debt to Rachel Carson as inspiration, but took a long step further into radical activism.[44] In Naess's description, "deep" ecology stands as an alternative to the "shallow" approaches of mere reformism. Reformism acknowledges such environmental degradation as water or air pollution, but fails to move beyond piecemeal corrections to probe the ultimate sources of damage. Reflecting many of his predecessors, especially Lynn White, Naess and his closest colleagues—American academics William Devall and George Sessions, and Australian Warwick Fox—argued that the most profound cause of the ecological crisis was conceptual: the "anthropocentric" orientation of the Western theological, scientific, and epistemological traditions, extending back to Greek philosophy.

For deep ecologists, a fatal wrong turn had occurred when Socrates posed the question, "What is justice?" He thus diverted philosophical inquiry from the contemplation of nature and the cosmos to purely human, "anthropocentric" affairs. Judaism and Christianity expanded this "anthropocentrism" by placing mankind at the center of their monotheistic beliefs as the special

[41]Ibid.

[42]Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1992).

[43]See Martin W. Lewis, *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

[44]See especially, Rubin, *Green Crusade*, chap. 4.

creatures of the one true God. This anthropocentrism was reinforced by the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, effected by such thinkers as Bacon and Descartes, which separated man from nature—viewing nature as something to be subjugated and dissected rather than respected.

The principal features and assumptions of deep ecology are summarized in the *Encyclopedia of Earth* under ten headings: holism; no ontological divide; self (no autonomous individuals, selves, are part of the "web of nature"); biocentric egalitarianism (you are worth no more than a snail darter); intuition (beware overdependence on rational thought); environmental devastation; anti-anthropocentrism; ecocentric society; self-realization; and intuitive morality. There is an abundance here for explication. Consider the descriptive summary of environmental devastation: "Nature is undergoing a cataclysmic degradation, an ecological holocaust, at the hands of human societies."[45]

This statement approaches religious eschatology.

Much of what Naess brought to environmentalism was a spirit of systemization and a willingness to spin out portentous-sounding principles. In 1984, Naess and Sessions formulated a Deep Ecology Platform as a point of departure for individuals and policymakers.[46]

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[45]*The Encyclopedia of Earth* (http://www.eoearth.org/), "Deep Ecology," http://www.eoearth.org/article/Deep_ecology.

[46]The eight principles of the "Deep Ecology Platform" formulated by Naess and Sessions, which can be found at http://www.deepecology.org/platform.htm on the Foundation for Deep Ecology Foundation website (http://www.deepecology.org/index.htm), are:

1) The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth; intrinsic value; inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4) Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
6) Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7) The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

Unlike many of its predecessors, deep ecology was almost exclusively academic in origin, although it quickly exerted significant influence among such radical environmentalists as Earth First! who found the "holistic" concept of nature particularly appealing. Deep ecology is thus a Philosophy of the Whole, in which everything, Commoner-style, is connected to everything else. It provides the conceptual "big picture," which New Left critics had found wanting in the environmental movement of the 1960s. Humanity occupies no distinct status within nature; there is egalitarianism among all species. And the mystical "communion with the earth" seems to suggest a spiritual or religious component. (Reflecting earlier observations of Richard John Neuhaus, the ever-contentious Murray Bookchin accused Naess and Sessions of "pseudo-radicalism" and promoting nature worship).[47] A heavy moral obligation *to act* is demanded of all who embrace deep ecology, although it is not clear what actions are required, in contrast to environmentalists like Paul Ehrlich and Barry Commoner, who advocated the imposition of massive regulatory policies and mandatory changes in consumer habits and industrial production.

Deep ecology, once on the fringe, has become a key component of the sustainability movement, but remains vague in its implications. What if any part of its longed-for revolution can be accomplished without coercion?

Environmentalism Becomes Sustainability

In 1987 the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, issued its report, *Our Common Future*. This document became a core text for the sustainability movement. It revived the sense of crisis and the interconnectedness (or "interlocking crises" in the Brundtland Commission's characterization) of ecological destruction and other social ills characteristic of the environmental movement:

> Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly compartmentalized within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, trade), and within broad areas of concern

[47]Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology versus 'Deep Ecology': A Challenge for the Ecology Movement," in *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, nos. 4–5 (Summer 1987), http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/ANARCHIST_ARCHIVES/bookchin/socecovdeepeco.html.

> (environmental, economic, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies in particular to the various global "crises" that have seized public concern, especially over the past decade. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a developmental crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one.[48]

The four hundred-page report's signature contribution, however, was its promotion of "sustainable development" as the essential remedy for the interlocking crises confronting humanity. The definition below has been endlessly quoted and paraphrased by today's sustainatopians:

> Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs....Development involves a progressive transformation of economy and society. A development path that is sustainable in a physical sense could theoretically be pursued even in a rigid social and political setting. But physical sustainability cannot be secured unless development policies pay attention to such considerations as changes in access to resources and in the distribution of costs and benefits. Even the narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation.[49]

The Brundtland Commission did not coin the term "sustainability," however, and the origins of its appropriation by environmentalists are obscure. It was and is a logistical military term in reference to keeping troops supplied with materiel and provisions.[50] An early instance of its

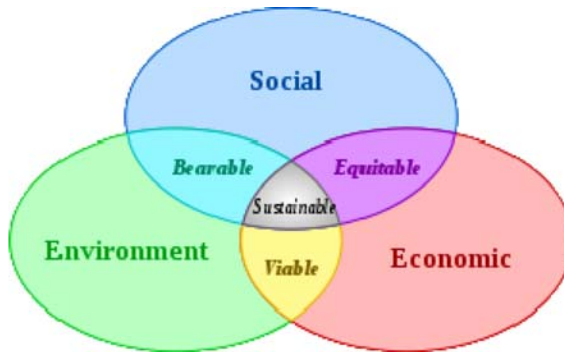
[48]Brundtland et al., *Our Common Future*, 6.

[49]Ibid., 34.

[50]The Department of Defense *Dictionary of Military Terms* (http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/index.html) uses "sustainability" in the following category under "military capability" (http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/data/m/03391.html):

> The ability to achieve a specified wartime objective (win a war or battle, destroy a target set). It includes four major components: force structure, modernization, readiness, and sustainability. a. force structure—Numbers, size, and composition of the units that comprise US defense forces; e.g., divisions, ships, air wings. b. modernization—Technical sophistication of forces, units, weapon systems, and equipments. c. unit readiness—The ability to provide capabilities required by the combatant commanders to execute their assigned missions. This is derived from the ability of each unit to deliver the outputs for which it was designed. d. sustainability—The ability to maintain the necessary level and duration of operational activity to achieve military objectives. Sustainability is a function of providing for and maintaining those levels of ready forces, materiel, and consumables necessary to support military effort. See also readiness.

environmental association is in the following title: *The Sustainable Society: Ethics and Economic Growth* (Westminster Press, 1976), a little-known work by Lutheran theologian and ethicist Robert L. Stivers. The term appears again in Worldwatch Institute founder Lester Brown's opus, *Building a Sustainable Society* (W.W. Norton, 1981). Prior to the Brundtland report, sustainability was depicted graphically by economist Edward Barbier, who devised an enduringly popular and politically potent Venn diagram:



Although pictorially compelling, Barbier's depiction was untenable.[51] Attempts to make sense of the overlaps and intersections proved endlessly elusive.[52]

Whatever its origins in the environmental lexicon, the Brundtland Commission gave "sustainability" international prominence and instant authority. The concept also proved amenable to an ever-expanding range of definitions, incorporating but not limited to economic justice, gender equity, "cultural" sustainability, tourism, income distribution, etc. Recently, the UN's International Environment Forum identified no less than 1,000 distinct definitions of presumably indispensable "sustainable development," prompting one exasperated critic to remark that

> Everybody can join. Any pet project—ranging from dislike for traffic congestion and concern for the Bald Eagle to fear that our grandchildren will be deprived of essential materials for survival—can qualify for

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[51]This diagram made its first appearance in Edward B. Barbier, "The Concept of Sustainable Economic Development," *Environmental Conservation* 14, no. 2, (1987): 101–110.

[52]See Majah-Leah Ravago, James Roumasset and Arsenio Baliscom, "Economic Policy for Sustainable Development vs. Greedy Growth and Preservationism" (Working Paper No. 09-09, University of Hawaii, revised October 29, 2009), 3, http://www.economics.hawaii.edu/research/workingpapers/WP_09-9.pdf.

> inclusion under the sustainable development banner. No scientific proof or serious logical argument is necessary to gain support for any particular cause. All that is needed to ensure that one's pet project or preference wins approval is to chant the mantra "this is needed in the interests of sustainable development..."[53]

Blessed with an elastic definition, sustainability had become *something very important*. A reenergized environmental movement—somewhat displaced from public consciousness during the early 1980s—recaptured center stage.

Less than a year after the publication of *Our Common Future*, sustainability received a booster rocket from James Hansen's apocalyptic Congressional testimony that hearkened back to Commoner and Ehrlich. Hansen, a NASA scientist, spelled out a vision of "global warming" as the newest ecological emergency requiring immediate, drastic counter measures. *Time* heralded the new era with its January 2, 1989, cover depicting an imperiled Earth as "Planet of the Year." In June 1992, the Brundtland report received support and massive additional publicity from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro—known as the Earth Summit—which issued a declaration elaborating twenty-seven principles for sustainable development in the twenty-first century.[54] The conference also authorized the creation of a new permanent UN agency, the Commission on Sustainable Development, to assist in the implementation of these principles.

The occasion also witnessed the resurgence of the alarmism and celebrity advocacy that had bolstered and legitimized the environmental movement from its inception. In 1992, for example, then United States senator and vice-presidential candidate Al Gore published *Earth in the Balance*, a best-seller in the Carson and Commoner tradition in which he asserted the need to make "the rescue of the Earth the central organizing principle for civilization."[55] And in November 1992, the international Union of Concerned Scientists issued an ominous, resounding "Warning to Humanity" that stressed the need

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[53]Wilfred Beckerman, *A Poverty of Reason: Sustainable Development and Economic Growth* (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2002), xiii.

[54]See http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=34756&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html and http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html.

[55]Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 269.

for immediate, comprehensive policy responses to the rapidly accelerating environmental crisis:

> Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision that our present course will bring about.[56]

Eighteen years later, the "fundamental changes" called for have not materialized, but oddly enough, neither has the anticipated extinction of plants, animals, and mankind.

Sustainability and Higher Education

Sustainability was born outside of the academy, but environmentalism paved a relatively smooth way in. The social activism of the 1960s was institutionalized by the 1990s, and the sorts of people who would have raised skeptical questions about a movement founded on apocalyptic visions and ideological enthusiasms had either retired or been marginalized. The new academy could only raise one series of questions to any new supplicant: Will you respect diversity? Will you accommodate the sensitivities of identity groups? Will you join in a view of the world that treats the basic narrative of society as a struggle between oppressors and the oppressed?

Sustainability came to the table with the right answers. But while the environmentalist movement had already joined the team by melding with ecofeminism, the environmental justice movement, and a tangle of alliances with other grievance groups, sustainability did not immediately become a major campus movement. That took some serious effort by determined advocates.

In 1990, Teresa Heinz, then married to Republican senator John Heinz, met Massachusetts Democratic senator John Kerry at an Earth Day rally. The

[56]Union of Concerned Scientists (http://www.ucsusa.org/), "1992 World Scientists' Warning to Humanity," statement issued November 1992, http://www.ucsusa.org/about/1992-world-scientists.html.

Widow Heinz met Senator Kerry again at the Earth Summit in 1992, and during the ensuing courtship in 1993 they co-founded Second Nature: Education for Sustainability, a non-profit organization dedicated to making sustainability a key feature of American higher education.[57] Second Nature had (and still has) a strikingly narrow focus. It would advance sustainability not by winning over students, not by funding faculty research, but by converting the campus leadership. With a focus on "senior college and university leaders," Second Nature placed itself, ironically, in the tradition of Christian missionaries who evangelized the chiefs, confident that they would in turn force everyone else to heel.

Moving outward from university leaders, Second Nature evoked the familiar environmentalist image that everything is connected with everything else. In the end, the community would convert:

> We believe that in order for society to move in a sustainable direction, higher education must develop a framework in which the sector and individual institutions operate as fully integrated communities that teach, research, and model social and ecological sustainability.[58]

In common with Marxist, feminist, Afrocentrist, and multiculturalist antecedents, Second Nature views sustainability as central to the *entire* academic enterprise, rather than as compartmentalized within a single discipline or department:

> Our work toward this vision embraces interdisciplinary learning and includes the community as a whole. By reinforcing the concept that the educational experience of all students must be aligned with the principles of sustainability, we help ensure that the content of learning embraces interdisciplinary systems thinking to address environmentally sustainable action on local, regional and global scales over short, medium and inter-generational time periods.[59]

With relatively little public visibility, Second Nature has gradually secured the support of senior administrators and other academics through a series of conferences, seminars, and international gatherings that promote its vision of sustainability. Its most signal success is undoubtedly the American College

[57]Second Nature: Education for Sustainability (http://www.secondnature.org/).

[58]Second Nature: Education for Sustainability, Mission Statement, http://www.secondnature.org/about/.

[59]Ibid.

and University Presidents' Climate Commitment. Signatories—now more than 650 college and university presidents, representing about a third of American college students—have committed their respective institutions to political, social, and educational activism, often at significant expense, in immediately addressing the "challenge" of climate change:

> We, the undersigned presidents and chancellors of colleges and universities, are deeply concerned about the unprecedented scale and speed of global warming and its potential for large-scale, adverse health, social, economic and ecological effects. We recognize the scientific consensus that global warming is real and is largely being caused by humans. We further recognize the need to reduce the global emission of greenhouse gases by 80% by mid-century at the latest, in order to avert the worst impacts of global warming and to reestablish the more stable climatic conditions that have made human progress over the last 10,000 years possible.[60]

A college president's commitment to sustainability virtually assures that academic deans, support staff, and department chairmen will do likewise. Newly-hired junior faculty members will also eagerly queue up, understandably believing that support for "sustainability" will enhance "professional development" and bolster their prospects of gaining tenure or promotion. They will also pass the good word to their students.

Beyond the tentatively informed enthusiasm of college and university presidents, the sustainability movement has been buoyed and promoted by the torrent of publications that has appeared since the Brundtland report. Typically, these works view higher education as the critical agent in service of the massive social, economic, and ideological reorientation necessary to ensure the "survival" of humanity and life on Earth. One of the earliest and most influential campus proponents of sustainability, Oberlin College environmental studies professor David Orr, sees the reform of higher education as paramount to sustainability's success. Reflecting the once marginal tenets of deep ecology, Orr fixes the wellsprings of ecological distress at the conceptual level:

> The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values. It is an educational challenge. More of the same kind of education can only make things worse. This is not an argument against

[60] American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment (http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/), Text of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/about/commitment.

> education but rather an argument for the kind of education that prepares people for livelihoods suited to a planet with a biosphere that operates by the laws of ecology and thermodynamics.[61]

Echoing the ideas of Arne Naess and other deep ecologists (as well as Afrocentrists, feminists, and post-colonialists), Orr accuses the Western philosophical tradition, especially the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, of providing the basis for devaluing nature and making mankind its master rather than one constituent part among The Whole.

The catastrophic consequences of this mindset require comprehensive social, economic, and political reorganization, a task Orr assigns to higher education. Those who are "educated," in Orr's view, must stabilize world population, cut greenhouse gases, grow forests, conserve soils, use energy-efficient materials and solar energy, eliminate waste, and pretty much undo "200 years of industrialization."[62]

It doesn't stop there. With Orr, we encounter the feature of sustainability that distinguishes it from the earlier forms of environmentalism: the triumvirate established via the merger with economic redistribution and social justice. So, along with undoing the Industrial Revolution, Orr also charges this educated elite with overcoming "social and racial inequities."[63]

Orr has successors, among them Andres R. Edwards, who explicates sustainability as the "holistic" approach entailing the Three E's: "ecology/environment, economy/employment and equity/equality."[64] The Three E's, however, must be addressed as a single entity, a "revolution of interconnections," once again invoking the master trope of the environmentalist movement, Commoner's mystic "everything is connected to everything else." Edwards declares:

> The Sustainability Revolution provides a vital new approach to tackling the issues confronting the world today. By taking a comprehensive look at the interconnections among ecological, economic and equity issues

[61]David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education*, *Environment and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994), 27.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid., 41.

[64]Andres R. Edwards, *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2005), 17.

> ranging from global warming to pollution, health and poverty, we are more likely to seek and implement lasting solutions.
>
> The Sustainability Revolution marks the emergence of a new social ethos emphasizing the web of relationships that link the challenges we currently face.[65]

The "web of relationships" encompasses an apparently limitless range of political and social issues, all of which, in Edwards's view, fit neatly under the "sustainability" umbrella:

> Sustainability encompasses a wide array of issues including: conservation, globalization, socially responsible investing, corporate reform, ecoliteracy, climate change, human rights, population growth, health, biodiversity, labor rights, social and environmental justice, local currency, conflict resolution, women's rights, public policy, trade and organic farming. These issues cross national boundaries, socioeconomic sectors and political systems, touching every facet of society and driven by life-affirming values that influence policies and initiatives at the local, regional, national and international levels.[66]

This synthesis, of course, has now become axiomatic to the intellectual supporters of sustainability. It purports to state a self-evident social and biological truth. But *is* it true?

Discovering connections between apparently unrelated phenomena is surely one of the keys to scientific discovery, but also to literature, art, and religion. We are, as humans, deeply oriented to seeking out patterns, and uncovering ways in which the universe fits together is among our most satisfying accomplishments. Such discovery often requires, however, that we first break things down to their underlying components. Simply asserting that everything exists in a "web of relationships" doesn't get us very far and may well impede the search for real connections. "Everything is connected to everything else" isn't science or philosophy. It is a declaration of faith. Sometimes the important thing is the discovery of non-relations. Magical spells don't make it rain. The evil eye doesn't cause sterility. Childhood vaccines don't cause autism. Some connections, no matter the grip they have on our imaginations, aren't real. Is it possible that carbon emissions don't cause global warming? When we hear such

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[65]Ibid., 9.

[66]Ibid., 8.

declarations from people grounded in the "everything is connected to everything else" approach to inquiry, we ought to approach the hypothesis warily.

Orr and Edwards, as leading and typical spokesmen for sustainability, also recall Charles A. Reich's *Greening of America*, that archetypal 1960s text invoking a new kind of knowledge one would gain through a vague, holistic "consciousness." Like his contemporary Herbert Marcuse, Reich established the "interconnections" between American consumer capitalism and all existing social evils by simple assertion. He believed this not because of compelling evidence, but as matter of "insight," and convinced those disposed to believe, almost as a matter of faith.

The sustainability movement proceeds in the same mysterious way, asserting a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the world, but rarely checking its propositions against the facts, and often furious when anyone dares to look beyond the conclusions to the supposed data. The movement espouses a peculiarly potent distillate of political and religious enthusiasm, even in precincts one might think would resist any rush to judgment. Within sustainability, "modeling" typically trumps evidence—models being infinitely adjustable and never actually falsifiable.

The late Michael Crichton observed tellingly that:

> Today, one of the most powerful religions in the Western World is environmentalism. Environmentalism seems to be the religion of choice for urban atheists....Increasingly, it seems facts aren't necessary, because the tenets of environmentalism are all about belief. It's about whether you are going to be a sinner, or saved. Whether you are going to be to be one of the people on the side of salvation, or on the side of doom. Whether you are going to be one of us or one of them.[67]

Physicist Freeman Dyson, a professed environmentalist but also a skeptic with regard to global warming, recently lamented the shrill intolerance and crude contempt directed toward dissenters like himself and MIT meteorologist Richard Lindzen by mainstream academic and scientific societies, for whom they have become apostates:

> The United Kingdom has made up its mind and takes the view that any individuals who disagree with government policy should be ignored.

[67]Michael Crichton, "Environmentalism as Religion," address to the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, September 15, 2003, http://www.michaelcrichton.net/speech-environmentalismaseligion.html.

> This dogmatic tone is also adopted by the Royal Society, the British equivalent of the US National Academy of Sciences....In other words, if you disagree with the majority opinion about global warming, you are an enemy of science.[68]

Like Crichton, Dyson attributes this puzzling hostility to the fact that environmentalism has evolved into a new and fervent religion:

> There is a worldwide secular religion which we may call environmentalism, holding that we are stewards of the earth, that despoiling the planet with waste products of our luxurious living is a sin, and that the path of righteousness is to live as frugally as possible. The ethics of environmentalism are being taught to children in kindergartens, schools, and colleges all over the world. Environmentalism has replaced socialism as the leading secular religion.[69]

Thus, Dyson concludes, even though the impact of environmentalism had been highly salutary and the movement unquestionably "[held] the moral high ground," the detached, scientific evaluation of global warming had been seriously impeded by the fact that

> some members of the environmental movement have also adopted as an article of faith the belief that global warming is the greatest threat to the ecology of our planet. That is one reason why the arguments about global warming have become so bitter and passionate. Much of the public has come to believe that anyone who is skeptical about the dangers of global warming is an enemy of the environment.[70]

Crichton and Dyson speak of the "environmental movement," but their words apply even more aptly to sustainability.

What exactly is the difference? Environmentalism focused on the environment and went in search of how environmental issues connected to other matters of concern to social activists. Sustainability simply assumes all those connections and reduces environmental issues to one leg of a three-legged stool. The credo of sustainability is that the earth, humanity, and life itself will be extinguished by human greed and folly unless we truly repent.

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[68]Freeman Dyson, "The Question of Global Warming," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 2008, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21494.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid.

Reducing your carbon footprint is not enough. We must also submit to new structures of authority in which those who possess the wisdom of "interconnectedness" will make the right decisions for us. We must relinquish capitalism, with its endless need for consumption and growth. We must reorder human society to rid ourselves of the age-old scourges of hierarchy, racism, and sexism.

Sustainability can put on different hats at different times, sounding as if it is sternly scientific at one moment, enchanted with mystical unities the next, and down in the street fighting for social justice and cut-rate mortgages the moment after that. Like most ideologies, it can be amorphous when it is tactically useful to its proponents to blur the issues. But it does have core ideas, and "interconnectedness" writ large is the most important of these.

From its origins in the intellectual contortions of the 1960s, sustainability has emerged as the newest missionary ideology within higher educational institutions in the United States. With an ever-expanding conceptual reach and touting the authority of "science," its influence is manifest in every aspect of campus life. It embodies the omnipresent sense of emergency long characteristic of environmentalism and the aggressive intellectual imperialism of the 1960s, and confers an automatic aura of moral obligation and concomitant moral superiority. Sustainability provides, to borrow Robert Conquest's term, "The Idea"—the thing, the system, the beliefs that encompass and explain *everything*—pursued by secularized intellectuals of the West since the late eighteenth century.[71] And it is now ascendant in academic institutions that have long since been transformed into citadels of ideological indoctrination, postmodernism, and political correctness.

[71]Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000).