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Paul B. Sears

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The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology

By

BARRY COMMONER

Knopf, 1971
Pp. 326, \$6.95.

Unlike Dr. Morgan,^{*} Professor Commoner is not so much concerned with pinpointing responsibility as with stating principles of inescapable rules of experience and presenting concrete examples of what happens when they are ignored.

This leads him towards a critique of modern society and the values that it sanctions. Nowhere has he stated this more tersely than in testimony before Congress where he asserted that no economy can long survive in violation of ecological principles.

His book begins with a brief but graphic account of the present environmental crisis, followed by a succinct description of the ecosphere of which man is a responsible part. This latter chapter ends with a timely reminder that in this complex modern world environmental understanding needs the help of science. Here is an answer to those critics of the author who object to the ardor and pessimism which he sometimes exhibits. So long as they express themselves with feeling, they have little right to deny this privilege to others, especially those who insist on the need to know what they are talking about.

The next several chapters, dealing with such specifics as atomic hazards, bad air, water, population, incautious production on farm and in factory, give a useful background for much that is being discussed in the public press. I find the one on Lake Erie especially interesting. Here the author has done his homework well; his evidence refutes the claim of a distinguished colleague—that ecologists have extrapolated their information from fish-bowls and ponds to that ill-treated Great Lake. The last 128 pages discuss social, economic, and, by inference, political issues. Here the author comes close to Du Bos' concept of the need to work toward a thermodynamic steady state if society is to survive, with population and culture geared to the sustaining capacity of the environment. Quite frankly Dr. Commoner faces the alternatives—grim political coercion or utopian voluntary constraint in moving toward such an equilibrium.

Complete justice to his views calls for careful reading. As he sees the problem in context (p. 213), "the nation's social system is grossly

^{*} Ed. note: See Book Review Dams and Other Disasters, p. 546 *Supra*.

incapable of supporting the people who created it in their present and expected numbers; they are, therefore, suffering poverty, unemployment, environmental pollution, inadequate schooling, injustice, and the tyranny of war.”

If he offers no prescription, he at least gives his effort at honest diagnosis, the first step in effective treatment. And it is well to recall his statement in Washington that no economic system can long survive in violation of ecological principles.

PAUL B. SEARS**

**Professor Emeritus, Yale University.