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A Utopian Perspective on Ecology and Development

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SUMMARY

Effective communication concerning environmental issues can take a variety of forms. The following essay is offered as a "metalogue", a piece of writing in which the writing itself illustrates the principles developed in the writing.

International readers will be helped if they know that "Jack Armstrong" and "Sergeant Preston" are heroes of moralizing (and often jingoistic) radio dramas popular among children in the United States during the War years and that the "Tom Mix Holster Set" and the "A-bomb Ring" were premiums offered to children in boxes of cold cereal in the period after the War. These "trivia" illustrate the kinds of societal messages directed toward the generation of Americans who presumably will be running the country during the 1980s.

Utopian Perspective

HOW TO FIX THE WORLD

We knew that we were becoming old when we began to see our view of the world as a product of a particular period in history.

We were raised in the midst of the American Middle Class during World War II. We grew up with our ears pressed to the fuzzy grille of the radio, listening to the adventures of "Jack Armstrong, the All American Boy", followed by "Sergeant Preston and his Wonder Dog, Yukon King". Our ears were pressed to the grille because our mothers had told us we could listen to only *one* program a day. Our parents were abstemious about radio-listening. The Depression had taught them to be abstemious about many things.

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For our parents, life on the "Home Front" must have been an ambivalent experience. On the one hand there was the accomplishment and sharing of people working together to get something done. Even though we were very young children at the time, we remember sharing a sense of common purpose with our parents, neighbors, and nursery-school teachers. We remember the rationing, the victory gardens, and the air raid drills. We remember the newspaper maps of Europe with the black ("Axis") part and the white ("Allied") part. And we remember thinking that the white part of the map got bigger each day and the black part smaller, *because* we were using only one teaspoon of sugar on our corn-flakes and *because* we were picking potato bugs off the vines in the garden and *because* we were turning out the light at night in the bathroom (even though it made us a little scared).

But then there was the War itself. Even though Jack Armstrong told us different, we knew—our parents must have told us—that the horror loose in the world community could not simply be attributed to the bad behavior of people in other nations. We remember pressing our ears to the same fuzzy grille to hear the countdown at Al-mogordo. We remember Truman's flat, nasal twang. We remember that we were the last kids on our block to own a B-B gun and a Tom Mix Holster Set and among the last to have our own, glow-in-the-dark, Atomic Bomb Ring.

The contrast between the pleasures of participating in a collective national effort and the distant horror of the War itself must have produced dissonance in our parents. "Dissonance" is a bit of psychological jargon which refers to the fact that people try to keep their cognitive house in order. The pleasure of national unity is *dissonant* with the pain of war. Could it have been that our parents, and our parents' neighbors, and our nursery-school teachers resolved this dissonance by promising that when the War was over, all the power that had been mobilized for destruction would now be mobilized for the good of humanity?

Whatever the psychodynamic was, our parents led us to believe that the world would be fixed after the War. And since we were growing up *during* the War, we expected that the world would be fixed soon. In fact, we expected that the world would be fixed before we came of age, because, unlike the young people of the sixties, we had no idea that we were going to have to fix it ourselves. Perhaps that's why we were called the Silent Generation in college: we were still quietly waiting for the world to get fixed.

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Rational people might dispute whether the world is in better or worse shape than it was in 1945. Some things have gotten better, others worse. But no rational person will argue that the world has gotten fixed—not by the efforts of our parents, nor by any efforts that we ourselves have been able to bring to bear in the twenty or so years that we might be held accountable for its condition. Why not? Why hasn't the world been fixed?

BEHAVIORAL ARRANGEMENTS

We believe that the world itself is fixable. We assume that if the world's material and supply problems were treated as such, they could be solved as such. That is, if planners conceived of the human population of the world as so many animals to be kept alive in a colony, then the means to keep them alive and healthy could be found. The level of support might not be very luxurious, but it would obviously be adequate.

We think that the failure of the world to get fixed since World War II has something to do with the *behavioral arrangements* of the world's ecologically dominant animal. In the 1950s, in a classical experiment, John C. Calhoun placed 12 healthy wild rats in a quarter-acre enclosure in Maryland, and left them there for more than a year. He provided a constant supply of water and food in hoppers at the center of the enclosure. In normal laboratory housing, the reproductive rate of rats is such that the food, water, and space available to Calhoun would have permitted the breeding of thousands of rats. But, in fact, the

colony never managed to get itself over 200. The problem was that whatever resources might be available for rat reproduction, the behavioral arrangements of rats did not permit a larger population.

Calhoun's enclosure was an allegory of the great Depression. Rats suffered amidst plenty. Some hoarded the equivalent of tons of food in their burrows and dominated access to the overflowing food hoppers. Others starved and died. The ecology of the pen was devastated. Sickness was rampant. Mothers were negligent toward their offspring. Infant mortality was high. Murder was epidemic. Even though there was ample food and water and space, the behavioral arrangements of the rats for some reason did not permit the distribution of the resources from the individuals that controlled them, to the individuals that needed them.

An experienced laboratory-care technician would have had no trouble fixing the world of Calhoun's enclosure. He would have brought in standard laboratory housing cages, divided the rats among cages by sex and by age, distributed food to the reach of each individual on a daily basis, and transported individuals from cage to cage in accordance with a rigorous schedule determined by age and sexual condition. In this

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manner, the technician would facilitate such activities as copulation, birth, nursing, and care of the young. Infant mortality would immediately fall to low levels. Disease would be controlled. Poverty would be eliminated; aggression would all but disappear from the colony.

The lesson to be learned from this allegory is that in one kind of environment, the behavioral arrangements of a species may not permit an equitable distribution of resources, whereas in another environment they may. The question to be asked, therefore, when distress is found in the world, is not "How do we fix the environment?" or "How do we fix the people?" The question is, "How do we fix the *relationship* between the environment and the people?" We suspect that the world has not gotten fixed, not because of the world and not because of the people in it, but because of some problem in the relationship between the world and the people.

RELATIONSHIPS AND HUMAN NEEDS

P. C. Thompson was trained as an anthropologist; N. S. Thompson, as an ethologist. Both anthropology and ethology are naturalistic perspectives. Anthropology teaches that much of what we take for granted as economic or social necessity and common sense are actually arbitrary, perhaps even frivolous, elements of our culture. Anthropology was first an outgrowth of and then a reaction to the nineteenth-century vision of progress. In a similar way, ethology was first an outgrowth of and then a reaction to the nineteenth-century notion of mental evolution. Ethology teaches that the mind of each species is not a rung on a ladder leading to human consciousness, but the culmination of its own line of mental evolution.

What anthropologists and ethologists might agree on is that there are broadly shared patterns of human concern that might properly be called "human nature". The two perspectives arrive at this agreement over different routes. The anthropologist gets there from noticing that beneath the chaotic variation in human cultures are common themes. The ethologist gets there from observing that the human species would be exceptional among animals if it didn't display characteristic behavior patterns appropriate to its ecology. Thus, both anthropologists and ethologists are susceptible to the argument that there is some subtle demand, some quiet tug of the human spirit that each society must satisfy if it is to be a stable and enduring one.

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The importance of this essential point is in danger of being lost because of ill-considered attempts to capitalize on it. In almost every year since we can remember, a new and bizarre account is offered of the central themes of human nature. Here we are thinking of books like those of Desmond Morris (*The Naked Ape*), Robert Ardrey (*African Genesis*), E. O. Wilson (*On Human Nature*), and Lionel Tiger (*Men in Groups*) to name just a few. The basic concept of these "innate depravity" books is that our current problems as a species arise from conflicts between elements of our primitive nature held over from earlier evolutionary or social times and our contemporary civilization.

The books are at best, idle, and at worst, dangerous. Granted, humans indulge in sexual, aggressive, territorially defensive, food- and shelter-seeking behavior analogous to that of animals. But what gives these activities their potency for good or evil in human life is the intrusion of *ideas* into their guidance. A hyena might go berserk and kill a few of its own kind, but no hyena would set out on a program of racial purity. A male baboon may try to copulate with as many female baboons as his colleagues will permit, but no male baboon would write (or even dream) the Kama Sutra. An oriole might build a complex nest, but he wouldn't paint its dome with images of God. The capacity of each of these activities for good and evil in their human manifestation is totally transformed by *ideas*. And it is to the relationship between human ideas and the world's resources that we must address ourselves if we are ever to understand why the world has not been fixed.

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Critics have been right to challenge the innate-depravity books on political grounds. Such books tend to lead their readers to be fatalistic or even indulgent of excesses in our current way of doing things. But many of the same critics have gone on to broaden their attack to include *any* attempt to specify and derive implications from notions of human nature.

The unqualified attack on naturalism is wrong. Considerations of human nature can never altogether be eliminated from social planning. Not even the most avid anti-naturalist would deny the importance of taking into account such elements as the need for food and shelter of human nature in social and economic planning. Thus the argument rapidly becomes one of deciding which elements of human nature to take seriously, rather than one of deciding whether human nature should ever be a consideration in social planning.

Thus, while we would agree that the naturalistic perspective in social planning has been foolishly abused, we do not think the perspective is itself faulted. We are still enthusiastic about its utopian implications. Naively, perhaps, we still believe that once there is an accurate vision of what it is that human beings truly need, then

societies may be organized which will be better able to provide it to them.

Which brings us to a crucial premise of this paper. We believe that human beings as a species have specific *cognitive* needs. People need to feel themselves moving in a scale of value away from a state which *their culture* defines as negative and toward a state which *their culture* defines as positive. The motion need not be *relative*; it can be collective, a motion of the group, not a motion within the group. The scale need not be material; it can be a spiritual scale or a scale of understanding. Whatever form the scale and the motion may take, a culture fails when it fails to establish any such scale and it fails when it fails to provide each member of the culture the opportunity to move on that scale. This characteristic hankering of human beings to be forward-looking, we shall refer to as "ambition".

MATERIAL AMBITION AND CULTURE

Could it be that the world has not been fixed because social planners have failed to take into account the human need for ambition in their planning efforts? The steps of this analysis are as follows:

1. All humans are ambitious, i.e., they need to have their behavior bound by goals of some sort.

2. Humans who are deprived in some straightforward material way, may be supplied with their ambitions by their state of deprivation. Their lives can be psychologically bound by their material needs.

3. For people who are not deprived in some material way, the dimension of their ambition will be more or less arbitrary and more or less determined by the culture in which they live.

These first three steps in the analysis are intended to be transcultural. That is, they are statements which apply to all cultures. The subsequent steps are meant to be culture-bound. They derive their worldwide importance from the fact that they are generalities about the culture which has dominated the world's developmental processes over the period since World War II.

4. For some cultures, the designated arbitrary dimension of ambition is material. In such cultures, people whose material needs are met will continue to acquire, control, and display material resources in excess of their material needs.

5. In such cultures, the material ambitions of the non-poor will place demands upon the material resources needed to feed the poor.

6. Any attempt to solve such a society's woes by ministering to the poor is thus doomed to fail-

ure. As each deprived person is lifted beyond the range of material deprivation, material *ambition* takes over and places an increasing demand upon the material resources of the society. This in turn diminishes the resources left over to feed the remaining poor. Thus, any attempt to solve the poverty problems of a culture in which ambition is defined materially is necessarily self-limiting.

The analysis suggests that the world has not been fixed because of an interaction between the world's resources and the structure of the culture which has directed their exploitation. The design of that culture around material ambition has guaranteed that as people become better off, they demand more and more from their environment, leaving less in the world for others to share. As

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international aid agencies have disseminated the ideas of material ambition to Third World countries, more and more cultures have climbed on this treadmill. The results have been that even though human beings have increased the quantities of energy and resources that they have extracted from the environment in the last 40 years, they have not succeeded in solving the material problems of large proportions of the world's population. And to the familiar problems of famine and disease, cultures based on material ambition have added the new and terrifying problems of resource depletion and contamination of the ecosystem.

WORK AND SOCIETY

According to the guiding mythology of a materially ambitious culture, a job is a way of making a living. But a job is many other things as well. A job is a place in a social organization, a position that defines one's importance and relevance to the lives of some other people. And most important, a job is a source of cognitive structure. It tells you when to get up in the morning and when to go home at night. It tells you what to do from moment to moment during the day, and best of all, it tells you *why* you are doing it. A job explains you.

Some 20 years ago when we were living in Berkeley, California, we saw on public television a BBC documentary on Americans and Leisure. The program stressed the importance of work to an American's sense of himself, pointed out that no American could really feel comfortable with time that was not spent working. It then pointed out that with the rates of productivity ever increasing in America, it might soon be true that work in America would become a *luxury*. In that case, work would have to cease to be the means of dispersal of resources necessary for life, or many people would have to go hungry in a sea of plenty.

Far from greeting this prediction with enthusiasm, the writers of the BBC program viewed it with much consternation. They saw that high productivity in a work-ethic society could be dangerously destabilizing. What, they fretted, will the average American do with the leisure time? They presented the viewer with a series of images of Americans engaged compulsively and frenetically in leisure activities: waterskiing, football, and the like. Then they suggested that if this much leisure produces this much unharnessed social energy, what might be generated in the super-industrialized, super-mechanized, super-computerized America of the future? Would Americans perhaps engage in foolish international adventurism? Would they squander their resources on a terrible war, simply to avoid the psychological turmoil of having too much free time?

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It was, of course, only a year or so later that a half-million young Americans went to war in Viet Nam. The Viet Nam war was fought at the high watermark of American prosperity. For the American Middle Class, it was a war fought in leisure suits, riding on garden tractors. We were a nation with \$ 20 billion a year burning a hole in our pocket and we could think of nothing better to do with it than raze Viet Nam and go to the moon. The world is fortunate that we had the moon to go to.

The tragedy of the 1960s is that we didn't employ those vast resources to solve our own problems. Even as we showered Viet Nam with American dollars and launched other American dollars into outer space, there were still Americans who needed those dollars to fulfill basic,

physical needs. How could such a crazy thing happen? How could we have failed in that time of greatest prosperity to have given all Americans the benefits of decent food, decent shelter, decent health care, and decent environment?

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The answer is clear. To have *given* anybody anything would have undercut the guiding myth that a job is a way of making a living. Throwing money away on some geopolitical domino 12,000 miles away or rocketing it into space are ways of getting rid of wealth that does not challenge the relationship between the obtaining of wealth and work. Giving money to people would call into the minds of every American, the question, "Why am I working?" Thus, history may conclude that the Viet Nam war was fought and the moon walked upon so that 200 million Americans would not have to question the organization of life around material ambition.

SUBSTITUTE FOR MATERIAL AMBITION

We are convinced the world will not get fixed until a substitute is found for material ambition as a time-organizing principle. To displace material ambition, the new form of ambition will have to be devised. It will have to be psychologically simple and open-ended as material ambition. Like material ambition it will have to provide reasons to get up in the morning, places to go, things to do, people to meet. It will have to tell people not only *what* to do, but *why* they are doing it.

What the new form of ambition should be, we cannot say. But we have some comments which may be helpful in discovering what it might be.

First, conservation cannot be a long-term organizing principle. For a principle to be an effective form of ambition, it has essentially to be open-ended. To conserve is an effective short-term psychological goal, but it is ineffective over the long-term. The problem is that each additional increment of conserving activity brings about a diminishing return from the environment. Once a person has conserved as much as he or she can without compromising physical needs, no additional psychological structure can be derived from conservation. Conservation is thus a closed-ended ambition.

Second, there are some institutions in our society which seem to have the potential for providing substitutes for material ambition. One such institution is the university. Since the 1960s, universities have more and more been evaluated in terms of their ability to serve the material ambitions of those who attend them and work in them. But it was not always so. At least in some times and places, universities have been seen as places where knowledge is pursued for its own sake. Inasmuch as the pursuit of knowledge is an entirely open-ended goal, it has some of the properties of an ambition around which a society could be organized without drawing disproportionately upon the world's resources.

CONCLUSION

We knew we were getting old when we began to see our view of the world as a product of a particular period in history. We grew up in a period of naive optimism about the future of the

world. We were raised to believe that if the human species failed to make itself happy, it was only because people failed to dream with enough clarity and vision and failed to work with enough energy and devotion to fulfill their dreams. In

**We were raised to be ambitious
for our world**

short, we were raised to be ambitious for our world. Nothing has happened in the meantime to change that ambition. Even granting the limitations in the biosphere, we see nothing that says that all people should not be reasonably happy, healthy, well-fed, and well-housed within our lifetime.

We need a culture that causes us to ask of nature only what nature can freely give. To the planning of such a culture, social planners and development experts must ultimately commit themselves.