

# LIVING AS IF GAIA MATTERED

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## OUR GLOBAL PREDICAMENT

The pursuit of megatechnics and imperialism by heavily industrialized nation-states and multinational corporations based in Europe, North America and Japan had already two decades ago degraded life severely - in quality for most people and in quantity for very many species and ecosystems. The 1972 United Nations conference on the human environment, in Stockholm, misleadingly implied recognition by governments of the fact that the biosphere was seriously unbalanced by industrialism, essentially as had been argued by *The Ecologist* and was scientifically described by that year's best new textbook, Paul & Anne Ehrlich's 'Population, Resources, Environment'. Rachel Carson is rightly credited with starting our current era of scientifically-based popular ecology; her 'Silent Spring' (1962) is particularly hated by chemical-industry apologists because it correctly and movingly pointed out large scope for synthetic compounds such as modern pesticides to contaminate the biosphere so widely & severely that sensitive organisms such as birds might indeed act as 'above-ground canaries'.

Warnings that unrestrained technology could wreak mayhem in the biosphere had been ignored before - the great seer Mumford remains largely unknown. Foley (1988, 89) has usefully summarized his main ideas.

Similarly, the grave and un rebutted warnings from a pioneer of computer science, Joseph Weizenbaum (1976), failed to slow detectably the deployment of computer technology.

The Stockholm Conference turned out to stimulate only minor, sluggish, and in most cases cosmetic responses by governments. The NZ Minister for the Environment acquired that title not long before going to Stockholm wearing it, but had not even a typist let alone a Ministry. Curbing even the most outrageous technological excesses - for example, excluding nuclear fission reactors (power stations and fission-propelled warships) from NZ - has unfairly cost volunteers enormous effort. Even more perversely, exclusion of nuclear weapons has cost, in the non-mandated central policy of the "Labour" cabinets since 1984, the transfer of our main natural resources to private (and, at least potentially, foreign) control.

1972 was also notable for 'A Blueprint for Survival', written mainly by *The Ecologist* founder & editor Edward Goldsmith. This remarkably far-sighted best-seller did not flinch, as almost all writings had done and still do, from pointing out the need for **de-industrialization** and, even more importantly,

**regeneration of human community.** This central need would be encouraged especially by **rural resettlement.**

A bigger flurry that year in the mass media publicized 'The Limits to Growth', predictions by allegedly objective computer modeling of future environmental problems, especially depletion of non-renewable resources, in a few decades. This book has rightly faded in status, partly because readers have realised that it offers few solutions. I regard it moreover as essentially escapist - "value-free" scientists shunning the label 'conservationist' and refraining from pointing out current depredations of excessive industrialism, instead drawing attention away to possible scenarios which could not be checked by many if any (being on a large 'MIT computer', in a program not immediately available for peer review).

I argue that the Greenhouse Bandwagon which has lumbered into action these past two years is mostly ridden (and, some of them hope, milked) by similar escapists. Their science is often inadequate (Bray 1990, Bryant 1987, Idso 1989, Watt 1987-9). That their predictions may well be right is a different point, and no derogation from this argument. My point is that they are mainly, at best, neophytes in ecopolitics (being mostly geographers who have until only the last couple of years shunned their social responsibility to interpret science in terms of public policy). They are nearly all interested in adaptation to, not prevention of, greenhouse effects, whereas at least one major bureaucracy - the South Australia Dept of Environment & Planning - begins with the fact that we must curb consumption and pollution. Some bureaucrats are ahead of many academics!

Seventeen years on, we must now admit that the Stockholm conference prompted very little slowing of the rates of the major degradations in our biosphere. In most important trends of damage, we have not even seen slowing of the rate of increase! Local victories cannot disguise the overall global acceleration of overpopulation, deforestation, pollution, endangering by hazardous industries such as fission, genetic engineering, etc. etc.

Goldsmith has lately been emphasizing that we have an environmental crisis because we have a social crisis. The breakdown of traditional cultures almost everywhere by mining companies, agribusiness, 'development aid', TV, etc. opens up new resources of wage-slaves and new markets for products increasingly transported internationally. Northern Europeans and Japanese removed from traditional ways of life by centuries of industrialism appear perhaps the most culturally deranged and destructive.

The satirical approach of Swift was revived by Douglas Adams in 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' and 'The Restaurant at the End of the Universe'; but even the notion of the plutonium rock group 'Disaster Area', banned from many parts of the galaxy because their P.A. system with its bass detonators violated local strategic arms limitation treaties, failed to arrest megatechnics' quasi-autonomous burgeoning.

#### "ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHIES"

Spreading albeit dim awareness of the biosphere's new difficulties prompted some impressive wisdom in 'A Blueprint for Survival' and elsewhere. Appropriate technology gained some interest; talk

and a little action began groping toward constructive responses - living as if Gaia mattered (though Lovelock had not yet propounded his version of the unity of the biosphere).

However, much of the best in '70s thinking has lost currency, partly because of certain more recent fads. False solutions lately abound, and I wish to attack some of them.

### 1. **Scientism**

Faith in science as the "main" way of knowledge, "sole" basis of technology, and furtive avenue to political power for some who cannot achieve it legitimately, may be waning but is still very harmful.

### 2. **Anti-science**

On the other hand, we are foolish when we fail to use the scientific method where appropriate for understanding Nature and for detecting bullshit.

Anti-science occurs in not only *e.g.* versions of astrology but also, as pointed out strikingly by Margarita Levin (1988), political trends attempting to regard science as a totally social activity.

### 3. **Anti-racism**

A welcome movement, notably since the 1960s, has been breaking down white supremacy. But that is not to refute the broader and older idea that races, especially those which have been genetically and culturally stable for hundreds of generations (*e.g.* the !Kung of the Kalahari, or inland Australian aborigines), evolve different views of the world and different ecological performances. Anti-racism has lately been embraced by woolly-minded guilty white liberals. An example of this trend I would deprecate is the vague message of 'Midnight Oil' in their song "The Beds Are Burning". Karl Stead, a respected Auckland emeritus professor, has convincingly argued that anti-racism is in any case far too narrow to be a main part of progressive political philosophy.

Of course, a society severely atomized and separated from Nature (*e.g.* Hong Kong, Taipei) may produce offspring of very little ecological experience and awareness generally (let alone specifically for respecting NZ or Australian ecosystems). Encouraging the more efficiently monetarist of them to migrate to NZ (the Mike Moore immigration policy) is ecologically foolish. This type of consideration is not to be confused with white supremacy.

### 4. **Economism**

In the past decade our role as managers of the biosphere has been enormously perverted by money-mania. Under cover of vague or meaningless slogan-chanting about 'the economy', 'efficiency', 'contestability', 'kmpetit'v prdkt', etc., our little country has been severely sabotaged. The public service has been almost abolished, *e.g.* the NZ Health Department and Education Dept are almost dismantled; national standards for many aspects of dangerous technology are being withheld and some abolished; major public property - *e.g.* rail, airline and electricity systems - has been alienated to corporate control, in many cases held out for privatization; hundreds of post offices, the most benign and broadly efficient outposts of the state, have been shut down; generally, the course of sabotage worked on Sri Lanka half a

decade earlier has been foisted on NZ. Lawsuits by the NZ Maori Council and the Tainui tribe have been a substantial, but almost the only, bulwark against this mad &/or vicious treachery. Main architect of the destruction has apparently been the economist G Scott (head of the Treasury).

At the end of 'Ecopolitics III' an economist was able to obstruct the issuing of a communiqué that economics is a school of thought unfit to be a basis for resource management; I hope such obstruction does not recur.

## 5. 'Anti'-sexism

To refrain from victimizing people on grounds of their sex is an ethical principle often mentioned during the past two decades. I take the term sexism to mean wrongful, or at best irrelevant, emphasis on what sex a person is. More lately, however, political tendencies have become widespread in the overdeveloped world based on the axiom that women and men should lead closely similar ways of life. I contend that 'ecofeminism' constitutes a contradiction in terms.

There's no serious dispute that feminism has gained political influence (though there is discussion about how much), especially during the period since 'The Female Eunuch'. The correlation over this period of declining restraint of technology, declining quality of life for billions, and declining physical and mental security even for the privileged within the overdeveloped world, is in my opinion partly due to the decline in co-operation between the two kinds of human.

I repeat here four paragraphs stated two years ago but hitherto obstructed from publication. The war between the sexes is doing far more damage than international debt or any other commonly-mentioned economic process - but it flares most inconveniently at a time when alienation is already being increased by loss of awareness that we must 'live more simply in order that others may simply live'. The increased resource consumptions entailed in separate houses, separate cars, etc. are only the start of objections, from an ecological viewpoint, to what has become mainstream feminism.

Perhaps the modern wave of feminism (the past two decades) was provoked mainly by the bringing-up of boys almost oblivious to the feelings of women. I myself was a typical result. But far worse alienation is, in effect, promoted by those versions of feminism which urge women to withdraw co-operation from men (let alone those which foment hatred of men). It is overdue to call *these versions* of feminism what they are: anti-social.

The great tragic irony of feminism is its adoption of careerist individualism. Women ashamed of the most important work have thus become a new wave of grist to the jobs-money mill, the industrial way of life which was already too unhealthy and unhappy.

The nuclear family of the 1950s was bad enough; today's children grope fearfully in a family far more often anti-nuclear, but all too often solo-parent. Greer has questioned most of her 1970-model ideas in her 1983 reappraisal.

We should not neglect to use anthropology to test and improve feminism. The book (Goldberg 1979) which summarizes the findings in the 1400 societies that have been studied on the subject of male dominance tells us that in all, men occupy the positions of apparent power. (The Amazons turn out to be

a forgery.) This very book holds the 'Guinness book' record for most publishers to reject a book that did finally get published: 69 - interesting for a culture said to be very biased against feminism!

Keesing's (1976) textbook on cultural anthropology, in its section "women's worlds", says:- As 16 women social anthropologists compellingly argue in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974), there is no evidence that matriarchal societies have ever existed. The apparent universality of male dominance - at least in public and political realms - must be a starting point for an anthropology of women.

The second edition of this book enlarges in very helpful ways, emphasizing the need for both empathy and some measure of detached judgment regarding inferences of exploitation.

Lisa Tuttle's 'Encyclopedia of Feminism' (1987) records the universality of patriarchy but says "alternatives to patriarchy may at least be imagined". I however contend we cannot imagine regenerating community on the basis of the erroneous notion that closely similar ways of life should, or even can, be led by women and men.

The real question is, what are the appropriate divisions of labor. We cannot deal with this question if we pretend there shouldn't *be* any significant division.

## 6. Noo Eege

This mental candy-floss has been ably criticized by Nigel Clark (1989). What Noo Eegeism has done is to graft the Gaia idea onto a mess of commercialism, individualism sometimes approaching solipsism, moral relativism, crystals, 'channeling', subliminal self-improvement tapes, . . . - it is not hard to infer which country originates this school of "thought".

Noo Eege glorifies individualism, overlaid by a veneer of global, nay cosmic, eco-awareness - with nothing in between! The prime need of industrial man - regeneration of community - is almost absent from Noo Eege.

Notwithstanding the inchoate nature of Noo Eegeism it has to a surprising extent hijacked, and undermined the credibility of, the Gaia idea. The Gaia model of our planet is, I think, not mere hypothesis; it's the only idea on offer for explaining Earth's extremely anomalous properties when compared with the planets on either side of us. The highly anomalous value of the surface temperature, and its relative stability, and the exceedingly odd chemical composition of the atmosphere, are not explained by any other idea than that the organisms co-operatively stabilize their own environment very far from physical and chemical equilibrium. I therefore view Gaia as not hypothesis but fact - admittedly very complex and somewhat vague, but nevertheless fact. Those who say it is only an hypothesis may consider the compromise of calling it an axiom; seen that way, it's at least a reasonable choice.

The question in any case is of course what to do about it. One temptation, to which its innovator Lovelock (1988) succumbed until only last year, is to credit Gaia with such powerful self-stabilizing mechanisms that *e.g.* the ozone shield cannot be seriously perturbed by a few tons of Freons. Another temptation is to go religious toward Gaia; but this is not essential to the concept.

## THE WAY FORWARD

We can see clearly enough which way to go. Regeneration of community would greatly facilitate, and may well be essential for, curbing the incidence of ill-health and of extinction. The main difficulty is organizing co-operation among the children of the nuclear family and, increasingly, the even less satisfactory solo-parent family.

The scale of human settlements (Sale 1980) must largely revert to the range 100 - 10,000 ; not only today's megalopolises of 10,000,000 but even "small" cities of 100,000 must be drastically decentralized and phased into clusters of much more nearly self-sufficient communities. Food should come usually from within one's horizon, mainly one's own extended-family garden.

"Back to candles & caves", we are misrepresented as saying by the technocrats and their PR front men (*e.g.* cabinet ministers) in idiotic or dishonest response to any such constructive proposals. But in truth the simpler, comprehensible technologies we need for a sustainable world would make various use - restrained use - of many modern materials and machines. We need to identify appropriate technologies and deploy them (and suppress bad ones such as nuclear bombs and reactors). The 'Gossamer Condor' may be one good image to nudge technologists toward minimalism. Far simpler machines such as village-scale biogas generators similarly should be deployed, at least in imagination and teaching. But there is no substitute for practice. I suggest that the term **appropriate technology** can hardly acquire any ecologically suitable meaning except in a society of hobbyists. Only a society with sufficient citizens involved in adjusting, lubricating, and to some extent making, various machines can form a reasonable assessment of new technology.

Child-rearing will also have to rediscover old principles. Over the past half-decade I've been increasingly annoyed at overindulgent child-rearing by parents around my age. Most children I come across have evidently been denied the guidance they need and deserve regarding what are the limits of behavior to keep a society even minimally coherent. Here again, as in feminism, we see the over swing of the pendulum: most of us who were brought up with what we thought excessive unreasoning control have now gone too far toward the other extreme. Dr Benjamin Spock has apologized for his early denial that babies can be spoiled, but many parents have yet to catch up with his maturity. Also, I suggest that growing up gardening is a good start in ecologically-appropriate living.

### **Blueprint(s) ?**

I am personally against issuing blueprints. Better to give out pieces of jigsaw puzzle - *e.g.* appropriate technologies and ideas for social forms. One creates a vision for a better future within a stated time-frame, and with some agreed frame of reference, viewed with the perspective of applied ecology. Others will form their visions by filling-in a gestalt stimulated by the jigsaw-puzzle bits we've pointed out (the straight-edged bits defining the frame of reference are especially important). We can only hope that those who fill in their larger vision will make use of our bits and will proceed to co-

operate for regeneration of community. But, of course, if they avoid discussion of their ideas, co-operative planning cannot occur.

Having been tribal for over 99% of our existence, Homo is surely a sap to discard this way of life. The nation-state having turned out to be such a comprehensive flop, we must defend the Fourth World - such tribes as still persist. Those few people who are trying to found new tribes deserve considerable tolerance.

Groups of humans are powerful ecosystem managers. This is inevitable, and I regret that some 'deep' ecologists may have been encouraging guilt &/or denial regarding this fact. Living in accordance with the realization that Gaia matters does not entail contempt for our own species. Images such as the Garden of Eden deserve revival.

The popular essay attributed to Chief Seattle points up the contrast of living *v.* survival. Having argued that we should not think our species irretrievably earthpest, I also argue that survival, for individual humans or even Homo the Sap altogether, has been over-mentioned during the modern era of environmental awareness. More important is **meaning** as expounded by the ex-Austrian psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Frankl (1962).

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*section purged by editors from my paper in the Proceedings of Ecopolitics IV*

During 'Ecopolitics IV' I experienced several examples of how far adrift feminism has gone. I mention a few which can be corroborated.

(1) In the session (Sep 20) on bureaucratization of the environmental movement, a man of about 70 had been speaking, with obvious sincerity, for about a minute when he used the word 'man' meaning *Homo sapiens*. He was immediately heckled by several angry women. I reacted "don't interrupt - we all know what he means". Dr Helen Caldicott flared "that attitude has caused all the trouble", implying a mentality of blaming men for not only war (as in her book 'Missile Envy') but also most if not all other ecological problems.

(2) After 90 min. of continuous discussion in that unventilated room, I passed the woman chairing that session a note "what about a 5-min break?". I was unacquainted with this person and not sure of her exact name. Her response was to hold forth angrily to the whole gathering that the note had been addressed to her under an abbreviated name. (A woman whom I later realized to be one of South Australia's most dedicated and accomplished environmentalists promptly indicated that she regarded the complaint as unreasonable.) At a cocktail party two days later, I attempted to clarify this unfortunate pseudo-dispute; the complainant dismissed such possibility out of hand by saying "I don't care what you think".

(3) Later during that cocktail session, I was talking with a leading Australian academic when we were approached by an angry woman who had participated in the Sep 20 session. She now pretended to address my companion, telling him that "the men at this conference are going to have to control Bob because of his obvious contempt for women". I naturally responded "you're wrong", to which she said "I'm not talking to you".

(4) Dr Sandra Taylor's paper included a suggestion that patriarchy has been confined to 'western and westernized' countries. A woman of evident non-Anglo origin asked her to define the term patriarchy; and I pointed out that scholarly works on patriarchy say it has been universal, not merely 'western'. I added that, since Dr Taylor had introduced the term and then used it in a way which suggested some unusual definition, it was up to her to clarify the matter. She was rescued from this by the chair, Dr Wendy Sarkisian, who asked the gathering whether anyone had difficulty intuiting what the term 'patriarchy' means. Thus was the matter deemed to be disposed of.

I recount these glimpses of "ecofeminist"s in action to suggest that theirs is a political trend lacking crucial conventions of intellectual life. As a long-time supporter



of the valuable core of sense within anti-sexism, I am naturally offended when gratuitously insulted by women who know little about me. More fundamentally, I am gravely concerned at the facile resort to *ad hominem* assertion - when discussion cannot be evaded altogether - by angry feminists.