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REFLECTIONS

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# Doomsday Every Day

## *Sustainable Economics, Sustainable Tyranny*



JACQUELINE R. KASUN

What will be the Clinton “legacy” is an intriguing question that comes up in various contexts. Certainly there have been unprecedented political and sexual scandals. The last American administration of the twentieth century will also be remembered for its devotion to feminism, environmentalism, multiculturalism, and one-worldism. Less well known, but arguably more world-changing in its effects, is the administration’s dedication to the concept of sustainable development.

“Sustainable development” was the galvanizing theme of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Based on the work of the Brundtland Commission in 1987, the goal of sustainable development has been enthusiastically promoted by the World Bank, the U.N. Development Fund, the U.N. Environment Programme, and the United Nations agencies promoting “world governance.” It inspires President Clinton’s Council on Sustainable Development. It has precipitated an avalanche of World Bank publications, such as the fourteen volumes of the *Environmentally Sustainable Development Proceedings* series of the 1990s, transforming untold acreages of forest into official paper. The phrase occurs frequently in the Chinese Communist press, usually in conjunction with news about the progress being made in the family planning program

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(Hong 1998). The two topics—sustainable development and “family planning”—are linked throughout the literature.

Economists have struggled, without much success, to reconcile the various definitions that have been offered for “sustainable development.” Herman Daly, an economist who has been involved since the beginning, says not to worry—lots of good ideas can’t be defined (1996, 2). Daly, long associated with the World Bank, has written the seminal works in the field and is now joined by a host of authors producing textbooks for the college generation. Instruction in “sustainable economics” suffuses or replaces introductory economics courses at a number of institutions.

Whatever it is, sustainable development promises to transform life on this planet. The Rio conference produced agreements on everything from land-use planning (including “sustainable mountain development”) and greenhouse gases to, of course, birth control. There were agreements on “human settlements,” “sustainable agriculture,” “biodiversity,” and on and on in its “Agenda 21” and its Climate Convention and its Convention on Biological Diversity (*Agenda 21* 1992). Though Congress did not adopt the program, the Clinton administration proceeded as if it had, adopting new federal regulations and appointing a President’s Council on Sustainable Development, made up of federal officials and prominent environmentalists, to pursue the agenda with vigor.

The Clinton Council on Sustainable Development has issued its own version of Agenda 21, declaring that we must “change consumption patterns,” “restructure” education, “conduct a high-visibility public awareness campaign . . . to adopt sustainable practices,” “create a network of conservation areas for each bioregion . . . based on public/private partnerships” (so much for private property), “realign social, economic and market forces . . . to embrace conservation,” “use building codes [to secure] . . . environmental benefits,” have “local . . . community planning . . . to develop a common vision,” create “a council of . . . key stakeholders to . . . achieve sustainable management of forests,” and “promote development of compact . . . neighborhoods” (good-bye, suburbs) (President’s Council 1995).

Moreover, it decreed that “population must be stabilized at a level consistent with the capacity of the earth to support its inhabitants,” whatever that capacity might be (President’s Council 1995). The definitions may be elusive, but the program is uniform throughout the literature. It is to create massive, new bioregional conservation areas; control land use, consumption, and markets; re-educate the masses; and control population.

The Sierra Club announced at the U.N. Population Conference in Cairo in 1994 that “local activists” of the club in the United States were working “in a consensus-based . . . process to establish . . . thresholds for . . . population and consumption impact on the local ecoregion. . . . Addressing local carrying capacities will improve the quality of life for all and help develop sustainable communities” (Sierra Club 1994). The club didn’t specify what action those local activists would take if it turns out that

local populations exceed carrying capacity, but, as will be shown, other devotees of sustainability have done so.

Since the Rio conference, more than 130 countries have created new bureaucracies to implement Agenda 21 and its requirements for sustainable development, according to the Earth Council, whose head is Maurice Strong, director of the Rio conference and now assistant secretary general of the United Nations (Earth Council 1997). Many local and regional compacts for sustainable development exist in the United States, stretching from Florida through Missouri to Santa Cruz and Humboldt County, California. Henry Lamb of the Environmental Conservation Organization has described some of them, including the statewide plans for Florida and Missouri (1998).

Sustained by foundation money and federal grants, rarely mentioning Agenda 21, salaried environmental activists are convening unsuspecting local citizens to engage in the “visioning” process to plan for the sustainable community in their future. Vice President Gore’s Clean Water Initiative and the administration’s American Heritage Rivers Initiative are nurturing the process by encouraging local “watershed councils” to make comprehensive plans for their regions.

### Herman Daly’s Apocalyptic Vision

Probably not many of these souls have read the works of Herman Daly or Maurice Strong, the Rio documents, or the modern college textbooks in sustainable economics. If they had, they might be less eager to help. Daly, an economist, first came to national attention during the 1970s when the Joint Economic Committee of Congress published his plan for reducing births by government licensing. As in China, the government would issue the licenses in the restricted numbers requisite for achieving its population targets, and persons attempting to give birth without licenses would be punished. Unlike the Chinese system, the licenses could be bought or sold, as in the modern schemes for emissions control (Daly 1976).

People of common sense hearing such schemes tend to find them fantastic and amusing. But the World Bank was so enchanted by Daly’s notions that it gave him a job as a senior economist in the Environment Department. In 1990 he and a theologian co-author, John B. Cobb, Jr., published their comprehensive plan for the salvation of the world, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy towards Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. Disputing major teachings of economics, the authors called for university “reform” to reduce the influence of economics and increase attention to the “social and global crisis” (357–60). That reform, of course, is now going forward. Like other leaders of mass movements, they argued that logical reasoning is greatly overdone and called for “a conscious shift toward . . . relativisation” (359). Such a shift also is rapidly occurring. Daly’s hostility toward economics is not unique; many aspiring world-changers have seen economics, with its emphasis on logical reasoning based on fact, as the enemy of their plans.

Daly and Cobb called for the conversion of “half or more” of the land area of the United States to unsettled wilderness inhabited by wild animals (255), the abolition of private land ownership (256–59), a giant forced reduction in trade and a change to self-sufficiency at not only the national level but at local levels also (229–35, 269–72), government controls to reduce output to “sustainable biophysical limits” (whatever those might be) (143), and the resettlement of a large portion of the population to rural areas (264, 311)—remember Cambodia and Pol Pot, who has been called “the ultimate deep ecologist.”

Moreover, they wanted a prohibition of the movement of private wealth (221, 233)—so much for any escape from the sustainable paradise—the abolition of direct elections, except for local officials who would in turn elect higher officers of the government (177), and, of course, complete population control by means of birth licenses. The intent was to promote the “biospheric vision” in the spirit of “deep ecology,” which sees the need for a “substantial decrease in the human population” to promote “the flourishing of nonhuman life” (377). They added that this necessary reduction in the “human niche,” a phrase echoed in subsequent United Nations documents, might be achieved either by a fall in population or by a decline in resource consumption (378).

Daly and Cobb understood that these vast changes would require some readjustments in attitudes, to say the least, and saw hope in the “influence of ecological and feminist sensitivities” (377). Not only have those attitude adjustments materialized, but academic economics, identified by Daly as the enemy, has also been remarkably helpful, producing quantities of new books and courses on sustainable development and related topics. Generous grants from government, foundations, and international agencies have encouraged this outpouring.

The justification for these massive changes in human life on the planet lay in what Daly and Cobb called “the wild facts”—that is, the alleged extinction of species, the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, acid rain, and the imminent exhaustion of oil supplies. The last, of course, has disappeared from the current list of portending calamities; but never mind, we now have deforestation and the methane crisis. In any event, the bottom line was that we suffer from an excessively human-centered point of view, and people should be taught to adopt the “biospheric vision” (376) in recognition of our “community with other living things” in the spirit of “deep ecology.”

Daly and Cobb provided no evidence of any of the catastrophes they listed and even acknowledged some uncertainty about the “precise physical effects” (416). Nevertheless, they insisted that the impending crises were “facts” that could not be denied. Scientific disputes over these matters have expanded since then, prompting the True Believers to develop new arguments.

Some of us may wonder whether the work we do makes any difference in the scheme of things. Daly and Cobb need have no such concerns. Their words, phrases,

and arguments now appear throughout the United Nations documents on the sustainable society and the literature of sustainable economics. And Daly, now at the University of Maryland, has reiterated his vision in a 1996 book, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*. Together with Robert Costanza, Daly now directs the International Society for Ecological Economics, based in Solomons, Maryland.

### Steven Hackett's Contribution

The nature of current college instruction in the field can be seen in a new textbook, *Environmental and Natural Resources Economics: Theory, Policy, and the Sustainable Society* (1998), by Steven C. Hackett, who teaches economics at Humboldt State University. As in Daly's case, Hackett's justifications for proposing fundamental social change are the imperiled biosphere and "the continued growth of human population," which causes "loss of biodiversity" and "deteriorating . . . wilderness areas" (12, 13), and many other ills.

On these points, there is serious debate, as the author admits. He insists nevertheless on "the potential for catastrophic change in the global climate . . . rising sea levels . . . inundation of . . . low-lying areas . . . desertification of . . . grain-producing areas . . . mass hunger . . . and . . . rapid loss of biodiversity" (12). These dire forecasts, of course, have been featured on television for a generation and will probably not unduly alarm modern students. Nor will these hardened young consumers of doomsday prophecies be surprised to learn that population growth threatens the "habitats of many of the world's species of animals and plants . . . the integrity of the world's remaining temperate zone wilderness areas, coral reefs and other marine ecosystems, and tropical rainforests" (12, 13).

Descriptions of these expected calamities recur throughout the book, repeating what college students have heard from Peter Jennings, Ted Turner, Al Gore, and Zero Population Growth throughout their young lives (Singer 1999). Global warming portends "hundreds of millions or more people leaving Bangladesh, the Nile Delta, and coastal China . . . summer droughts . . . heat waves . . . reduce[d] soil fertility" (190–91). According to Hackett, the distinguished scientists (including a former president of the National Academy of Sciences) who dispute this scenario (Seitz 1998) have ulterior motives; he says many of them are in the pay of the coal and oil industries (192). Never mind the flood of grants going from the Department of Energy, the World Bank, and other sources to Hackett's side.

"Deforestation" is a dire threat, according to Hackett, although Food and Agriculture Organization data show that forests occupy 30 percent of the world's land area, a fraction that has not declined since 1950 (U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization 1950–1994). In the United States the forest cover of one-third of the land has not declined since 1920, but the annual growth has more than tripled, according to

the U.S. Forest Service (U.S. Forest Service 1992). The National Wilderness Preservation System grew from 9 million acres in 1964 to 104 million in 1994 (National Wilderness Preservation System 1994).

The “rate of extinctions” is a matter of great concern to Hackett, but here again many questions arise. For one thing, there are no data. As David Jablonski, who also believes in the decline, has noted, “we have no idea how many species there are or how many are endangered” (Stevens 1991). Species such as the blue whale (Baskin 1993) and the black-footed ferret (Lamberson 1994), once reported as nearing extinction, turn out to be more numerous than previously thought. The vast extent of unexplored wilderness throughout the world means that human beings are very far from being able to take a census or even make a decent guess about the numbers of other species. Also, if the earth really is warming, that change should be very good news for the species, because many of them thrive especially well in warm climates.

This is not to argue that nothing should be done about the obvious cases of excessive hunting and abuse of the non-human creatures. The reports—one hopes they are false—of the massive kills during the big-game hunts of the Duke of Edinburgh, who heads the World Wildlife Fund, are sickening.

Hackett describes the causes of the impending environmental collapse. First, there is social and economic injustice. Certainly no one can deny that the world has more than enough injustice. That it is a main cause of environmental problems, however, is not clear. When he reports that “the wealthiest 20 percent of the world’s people receive 82.7 percent of the world’s income,” while “two-thirds of the world’s people live on the equivalent of \$2 or less per day” (13), he seriously distorts economic reality. An economist, of all people, should understand that income bears some relation to productivity. The people of Bangladesh are not desperately poor because the people in the United States enjoy a high standard of living in their relatively free and peaceful society. Bangladesh suffers from a huge, corrupt, foreign-aid-dependent bureaucracy that milks and strangles its people’s productivity.

At another point in the book, Hackett points out the major problems in measuring gross product and thus in comparing it for different countries, but these difficulties do not deter him from making this comparison between the rich and the poor.

Also maddeningly unworthy of an economist is Hackett’s statement that “the South African government must also provide for the basic needs of the very poor, mostly black, people . . . including medical care, water, . . . housing, and schools” (301). Does Hackett not realize that the people always and everywhere provide for themselves as well as for their government? The people raise food; they build houses, hospitals, and schools; they nurse the sick and teach and pay taxes. What the government should do, but often doesn’t, is to allow the people to work and produce in peace and safety. Hackett’s patronizing attitude, so common among various world-changers, toward people, this view of them as the helpless wards of government, is profoundly disturbing in a textbook on economics.

## Is the Earth Overpopulated?

Overpopulation, according to Hackett, is a major cause of our doleful condition. Having softened the obviously elitist implications of the diagnosis by professing his concern for injustice, he can get on with the real message. The prolific people of the less developed countries are wreaking havoc on their “fragile environments,” engaging in “deforestation . . . migration to . . . polluted urban areas . . . massive environmental degradation” (13), and so forth. Unmentioned are the government policies that create these disasters, such as the destructive taxation of farmers’ productivity, the government monopolies that underpay and overcharge the people, the confiscation of traders’ stocks and pack animals, the endless wars financed by foreign aid.

Hackett doesn’t mention the large current declines in fertility and population growth rates throughout the world. United Nations figures show that seventy-nine countries with 40 percent of the world’s population now have fertility rates too low to prevent ultimate population decline in those countries (U.N. Population Division 1996). But this evidence gives little comfort to Hackett, who quotes estimates showing that “2 to 5 hectares of productive land are needed to support . . . the average person . . . in an industrialized country [whereas] . . . the world has only 1.5 hectares per capita of ecologically productive land . . . and . . . only 0.3 hectare per capita are suitable for agricultural production” (263). In other words, not only does the less developed world have far too many rapidly multiplying people, but *population in the industrialized countries is several times too large*.

As he does throughout the book, Hackett hedges by saying that we don’t really know our “carrying capacity,” but the undergraduate reader is going to learn that, whatever that capacity may be, there are already far, far too many people on the earth. In a like vein, Paul Ehrlich, famous for his unblemished record of wrong forecasts, has said the world has “perhaps” five times as many people as it can tolerate (Ehrlich 1989).

Let us not imagine, therefore, that the advocates of the sustainable society are merely talking about cleaning up pollution and giving birth control pills to people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Although present State Department and U.N. efforts to restrain the increase of dark-skinned people are very strenuous indeed, they are seen as not nearly enough. Hackett quotes Devall on the desirability of “a substantial decrease of the human population” (20). And he describes the “coercive fertility-control” in China (234) and the proposals of Daly and Cobb and Kenneth Boulding for birth quotas. Spokesmen for the Clinton administration, such as Timothy Wirth, have specified that world population control must include the United States (Wirth 1996). Notice, too, that all of the sustainable society documents call for “population stabilization,” without saying whether that is to occur at a population size larger or smaller than the present population.

We hope no guilt-ridden students rush to jump out of our overlaid lifeboat before, first, asking why Hackett, Daly, Cobb, and Ehrlich have not done so already and, second, hearing some other information. Again according to Ehrlich and other, more reliable, sources, human beings actually occupy between 1 and 3 percent of the world's land area (Vitousek et al. 1986). The entire world population could be put into the state of Texas, leaving the rest of the world devoid of people. The population density of that giant city of Texas would be about 20,000 persons per square mile, which is somewhat higher than in San Francisco but lower than in Brooklyn (5.9 billion world population divided by 262,000 square miles of land in Texas implies 22,500 persons per square mile, or 1,200 square feet per person).

Farmers use less than half of the world's arable land (Revelle 1984). The world food supply has increased a great deal faster than population since 1950, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization 1996). This increase, however, has left millions in Bangladesh and elsewhere still hungry, for the reasons already mentioned. Recent studies at the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology show that farmers could feed a future population of 10 billion by using less cropland and producing less silt and pesticide runoff than at present, thus leaving more land for nature (Waggoner 1994). And the prospects for the world population's ever reaching 10 billion grow dimmer by the hour (U.N. Population Division 1998).

Although many population scholars note that fertility declines when output and income grow, Hackett presents Ehrlich's claim that "Mexico and Brazil . . . have undergone periods of income growth with little or no reduction in birthrates" (232). In fact, the crude birthrate (births per 1,000 population) in Mexico fell by more than 40 percent between 1950 and 1995, according to U.N. data, and in Brazil it fell by more than 50 percent (U.N. Population Division 1996). In 1950–55 the typical Mexican woman was having almost seven children during her lifetime; in 1990–95 the number was three. In Brazil in 1950–55, the typical woman was having six children during her lifetime; by 1990–95, the number was 2.44 (U.N. Population Division 1996). The reason these changes are probably permanent is that the world is rapidly urbanizing, and rearing children is much more difficult and entails a higher opportunity cost in urban settings, where women can and often do work outside their homes.

Hackett misses another important fact in his chart of the "demographic transition" (233). Not only does the birthrate fall as development proceeds, but the death rate rises, after an initial decline. The reason is that eventually the population grows older on the average as fewer babies are born, and death rates are higher for elderly groups. Thus, the crude death rate in elderly Sweden is 11.4 per 1,000 population, whereas in youthful Mexico it is only 5.2 (U.N. Population Division 1996). These two events—the decline in the birthrate and the rise in the death rate—work together to reduce population growth.

## Market Failure?

Hackett has little hope that existing institutions can steer the earth away from the looming catastrophes. As for markets, they “reinforce self-interested behavior” (29). One searches Hackett’s book in vain for any sign of understanding Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” that leads men to serve one another and to economize in their use of resources as they pursue their own self-interest. There is no sign that Hackett has ever read the great economist John Maurice Clark, who called the market “our main safeguard against exploitation” because it performs “the simple miracle whereby each one increases his gains by increasing his services rather than by reducing them” (1948). He seems unaware of Walter Eucken’s perception that markets break up the great concentrations of economic power (1950) or F. A. Hayek’s (1948) and Ludwig von Mises’s (1949) realization that markets provide otherwise unavailable information about the scarcity of the resources that are the focus of his concerns.

This is not to argue that markets will solve all economic problems. Well-known and much-discussed problems of externalities, public goods, and common pool resources, sometimes arise, as Hackett notes. But the nonmarket economies of this century have provided vivid object lessons in the pitfalls of “communitarian” planning, and the work of James Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, and others has pointed up the perverse incentives that infest the public sector as it goes about trying to correct “market failure.”

At times Hackett acknowledges that public ownership and management do not always produce ideal results, but for the most part he sees the market as the villain and concludes that our best hope lies in “cooperative rather than noncooperative decision making” (91). It is a conclusion he draws from game theory, and it leads to his hopes for “sustainable development” through small-group negotiations. On this issue, more later.

A glaring defect of the market, according to Hackett, is that “issues of fairness, ethics, and spirituality may not be commensurable with monetized costs or benefits. Can we compare the value of a unique sacred place to the revenues and jobs created by logging, mining, or razing the site?” (97). The young activists trashing a congressman’s office in Hackett’s own area, Humboldt County (*Times Standard* 1997, 1998), which is three-fourths covered with trees (Lammers 1998), have decided that a stand of privately owned trees is uniquely sacred and that logging amounts to “razing.” They have made that judgment even though tens of thousands of acres of old-growth redwoods exist in parks and reserves where they will never be cut (Lammers 1998) and this particular stand will certainly be replanted—the company plants thousands of trees a year, and a redwood will grow six feet a year out of its own stump (as I’ve seen in my own ten acres of redwoods). Do the rhetoric and violence of these inflamed youngsters constitute a preferable basis for decision making in this case?

Not surprisingly, Hackett finds private property highly suspect: “It is clear that systems centered around private property . . . can conflict with the common good” (26). After a brief discussion of John Locke and proposals for protecting natural resources by assigning private property rights to them, Hackett points students to a patron saint of the French Revolution: “From Rousseau’s perspective . . . private property rights . . . alienate people from nature . . . [and] lead to inequality . . . and wars.” He quotes the great man: “Competition and rivalry . . . opposition of interests . . . and always the hidden desire to profit at the expense of others. All these evils were the first effect of property” (25–26).

Such an indictment demands a response. Private owners did not hunt the buffalo almost to extinction. And it was not a private property system that sent millions to the gulag. When the Ethiopian government socialized the privately owned donkeys, most of them perished (Deressa 1985). I keep the off-road vehicles out of my private forest. And the biblical good shepherd was not the government or the assembly of “stakeholders” in the “sustainable community”; he was the *owner* of the sheep. Where does the common good lie in these decisions? And, most important, Who decides what the common good is? In fairness, also, Hackett might have mentioned the bloodbath that Rousseau’s ideas encouraged. Like Devall, Daly, and other environmental utopians of our own time, Rousseau distrusted reason and argued for going “back to Nature.” Ever the romantic, he sent his five children to a foundling home (Gauss 1972).

Economists have long noted that voluntary trade must make its participants better off or they wouldn’t engage in it, whether they are children trading the contents of their trick-or-treat bags or Mexicans buying used bottles from California to turn them into gravel. Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and even Sir Dudley North before them, saw it as the solution to the uneven distribution of resources. Hackett, however, like Daly and Cobb, whom he quotes at length, lists many objections to trade. It “may . . . allow rich countries to import pollution-intensive, resource-intensive, and endangered-species products they do not wish to produce themselves and to export their toxics and trash” (225). It “tends to erode livable wages, the bargaining power of unions, and environmental and other standards of communities” (226). It “undermines sustainability” (227) and “has put great pressure on . . . endangered wildlife” (229).

Nevertheless, Hackett concludes that although there are “important questions” about how much and what kind of trade to allow, “it is neither practical nor desirable to eliminate trade completely” (230). What a relief. Clearly, however, what is left will be a far cry from free trade, just as all other human activity will be far from free in the “sustainable society.”

Throughout the world, controllers and would-be controllers have seen, to use Smith’s phrase, the human “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange” as a resource to be exploited or suppressed for the benefit of those in power. From mercantilist England, France, and Spain to the recent Soviet Union and modern Ethiopia, governments have sought to channel this propensity, always with the result of impoverishing

their subjects. To illuminate the ill effects of trade controls was the main task of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. That modern proponents of the "sustainable society" should be so eager to revive such controls should give us pause—doubly so because these people *intend* to reduce human consumption, and they understand very well that trade restrictions do impoverish people.

Like Daly, Hackett takes a dark view of what he calls "mainstream economics." Students who have studied economics, according to Hackett, are less altruistic than other students (28). Economics itself, he maintains, tends to reduce everything to a monetary cost-benefit comparison without recognizing "intrinsic" values. In his view, however, not all intrinsic values are equally worthy of recognition. Individual rights are especially suspect. By contrast, the "sustainability ethic holds the interdependent health and well-being of human communities and earth's ecology over time as the basis of value" (209), and is therefore clearly superior to the viewpoint of mainstream economics.

## Economics and Ethics

Private property, the market, and economics itself, it would seem, are the bad fruit of a bad tree, the disordered ethical system of contemporary society. Hackett blames the shortcomings of economics on its "teleological ethics"—that is, the end justifies the means—attributing the idea to "religious philosophers" (21). This reference enables him to take a swipe at both religion and economics. Evidently, Hackett either never had catechism or was inattentive when Sister told him the end does not justify the means. His example is "utilitarianism," which he describes as the "normative base" for "much of the traditional economic perspective" (21). His straw man is Jeremy Bentham, a nineteenth-century eccentric who had his body stuffed and put in a glass case after he died so it could be on view for University College, London, undergraduates for all time (Mack 1972).

Bentham's mechanical pleasure-pain calculus has amused students for generations, but other men—Smith, Jean Baptiste Say, Ricardo, Carl Menger, Alfred Marshall, and others—did the serious work of showing how the market reveals and reconciles the varied and conflicting desires of multitudes of individuals, channeling their self-interest to the service of others in their pursuit of individual gain.

These monumental themes receive barely a glance from Hackett, who remains intent on showing the failures of market calculations and the need for more sublime direction by persons imbued with the spirit of the sustainable community and tutored in sustainable economics. To illustrate, Hackett poses the "question of whether an action (for example, policy protecting old-growth forest) is to be judged on its intrinsic rightness or based on the measurable benefits and costs that might result" and "the proper balance between individual self-interest and the common good," again undefined (17–18).

There ensues a discussion of the “fundamentals of ethical systems,” beginning with “deontological ethics,” which judges an action by “its intrinsic rightness” (19). As an example, Hackett quotes at length from the “ecosophy,” or “earth wisdom,” of Bill Devall, George Sessions, and Arne Naess:

The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves. . . .

The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.

Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation . . . to . . . implement the necessary changes. (20, quoting Devall 1988)

Clearly, this call is not for minor adjustments in lifestyle. A “substantial decrease of the human population” is no small thing. Our “obligation . . . to . . . implement the necessary changes” is a profoundly serious matter. This proposal is not a nickel-and-dime deal. True, Hackett is only quoting Devall at this point, but his discussion makes it clear that Devall’s insistence on “intrinsic rightness” is a far more beautiful thing than the crass monetary valuations of “utilitarian” economics.

To make the issue perfectly clear, Hackett offers an example. Suppose an endangered species is threatened by development. Guess what will happen in a “society that views the existence of a species as being of intrinsic value” (à la Bill Devall). Then guess what will happen if a monetary cost-benefit comparison determines the outcome. Obviously, all economists, except an enlightened few, should be taken out and shot.

Nowhere in Hackett’s discussion of ethics does he refer to the Judeo-Christian tradition of stewardship—the admonition to “keep” the earth (Gen. 2:15), the prescribed days of rest for men and beasts (Deut. 5:14), the prescribed years of rest for the land (Lev. 25:4), the love of nature with its “Leviathan” taking its sport in the sea and its “coney” among the rocks (Ps. 104), its cedars of Lebanon (Ps. 92), its hills that “rejoice on every side” and its valleys that “laugh and sing” (Ps. 65), and the strict injunctions against the worship of nature and the human sacrifice that often accompanied it (Deut. 17:3, 20:2–6; 2 Kings 17; Job 31:26).

Modern economic reasoning does not destroy these values any more than modern atmospheric science destroys the beauty of a sunset. Certainly, the sin of greed has always beset the race, as has idolatry. Just as certainly, modern economics has its idolaters as well as its Midases, but such corruption is nothing new on earth. Economic reasoning enables us to compare alternatives. It enables us to see that a society following the romanticism of Devall or Daly would probably be no more attractive or healthful than the one we have. One of the greatest tragedies of our time is not that undergraduates study economics but that they study so little of the great civilizing

themes of our heritage—our great literature, art, and music, our legacies from the ancient Greeks, our tradition of human rights and our history of the struggle for liberty—and that they know so little about Christianity or Judaism. Thus deprived, they are left vulnerable, not so much to “utilitarianism” as to environmental lunacy.

Worse yet, as John Grobey, professor of economics and a senior colleague of Hackett at Humboldt State University, has noted, the result must be to deprive young people of the traditional birthright of youth—hope for the future. Taught from their earliest years that their own burgeoning humanity is destroying the earth and all of nature, the youth of today face a more depressing prospect than perhaps any previous generation. No wonder the doubling of the suicide rate among children aged ten to fourteen since 1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1997). No wonder the epidemic of school shootings. No wonder the recent case in Humboldt County in which a young man on trial for attempted murder gave as his defense “overpopulation, dwindling resources and the certain doom of the planet” (Parker 1998).

The changes in “basic economic, technological, and ideological structures” called for by Devall obviously threaten traditional views of individual rights to life, liberty, and property. The question that occurs to a mainstream economist at this point is, Just which individuals will be given the awesome responsibility of determining the “common good” and the best interests of the community and the ecology? And what will happen to human beings, stripped of individual rights, who get in the way of the grand march to the sustainable community? Hackett gives hints but no answers. He acknowledges the seminal work of Daly, but without mentioning Daly’s call for massive resettlement of populations. The question remains: Is the centuries-long pilgrimage from Magna Carta through *Arcopagitica* and the Bill of Rights to Selma to be renounced now in the name of the environment? Will this denouement be the Clinton legacy?

### No Price Is Too Great

Having demolished economics, private property, the market, and individual rights, Hackett poses the question, “So what is the nature of our economy, and what should we do to change it?” (27) Traditionally, textbook writers have not set out to change society or to incite their students to change it, but Hackett’s is not a traditional book. His answer is, “The discipline of ecological economics has recently organized itself around the integration of ecology (nature’s household) with economics (humankind’s household), an integration that is central to the concept of a sustainable society” (209).

Accordingly, Hackett offers a long list of ways to use “ecological economics” to bring about the sustainable society, including solar cookers, wind machines, hydrogen-powered vehicles, “eco-labeling,” encouragement of local small businesses, and eco-tourism (presumably reserved for a select few in the new regime of heavy taxes on gasoline and restrictions on access to conservation areas). Undergirding everything

would be new taxes, government regulations, and subsidies. In a word, applying “ecological economics” entails a comprehensive government network of social and economic controls to reduce us—those of us who remain after the population has been forcefully “stabilized”—to a preindustrial standard of living (270–84). (No doubt our leaders, who jet from one international conference to another to plan our future, would be exempt from the constraints applied to the rest of us.)

Hackett is honest enough to acknowledge that government requirements for alternative energy in California have given rise to energy prices 50 percent above the national average (279). And he is economist enough to admit that, if we are indeed “running down the natural environment” (256), steeply rising resource prices will force the shift to less depleting and polluting technologies. The problem is, as other devotees of planning have claimed, the market may be “too late” to prevent “irreversible” destruction (277). The evidence, however, does not suggest that government is quicker than the market to recognize problems (Stroup and Meiners 1999). Witness the numerous examples of government projects that have become ecological disasters, including Aswan and Chernobyl and the Great Leap Forward.

“Most important to the success of more sustainable production and consumption,” Hackett concludes, “is for people to become convinced that existing systems are destructive” (272). His book certainly does its bit along those lines. To shore up his case for wrenching changes, Hackett advises that conventional cost-benefit analysis is inadequate, that “there is no good ethical argument for using a pure rate of time preference other than zero” (241). He omits the standard procedure of risk analysis, which takes into account the probability (or improbability) of uncertain events. In plain English, we are to treat nightmarish visions of the far-distant future as if they were present reality. Stop arguing. It’s an emergency. Do as we say, now.

Sealing his case, he argues, “Preservation has option value—it gives us time to learn about the possible services that are provided to people by the rain forest” (110). Never mind that trees grow and that reforestation is also occurring. Preserve it, except, of course, when it’s going into masses of U.N. publications on the sustainable society.

Hackett makes it sound as if the sustainable society will be brought about by local meetings of “stakeholders” negotiating over local issues. But undergirding these cozy negotiations will be “regulations, taxes, subsidies, and direct funding of clean technology” (277). Of course, the Sierra Club will be there to help.

Here is the rub. To avert a highly problematic future disaster, much disputed by competent scientists, Hackett and his soul-mates in the United Nations and the Clinton Council on Sustainable Development would require human beings to submit to a gigantic present sacrifice of freedom, human dignity, and material welfare in a regime controlled by unelected officials of a global eco-bureaucracy. Have we learned nothing from the utopian horrors devised for us during the past century?

People do love nature. The tremendous expansion of national parks and conservation areas during this century testifies to that love. The environmental movement itself is an expression of our determination not to let the industrial age destroy the oceanic Leviathan and the cedars of Lebanon. The real danger now, however, is not that we stand on the verge of destroying nature but that, stampeded by environmental terrors on every hand, we are plunging over the cliff into totalitarianism.

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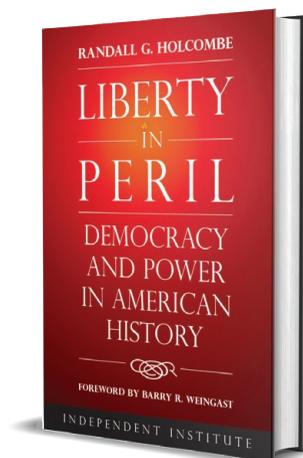
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