

CENTER FOR REFLECTION ON THE SECOND LAW
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The Second Law Study Group is an informal arrangement which includes a shifting "membership" of maybe thirty to forty. Meetings, roughly monthly in frequency, see a maximum so far of about fifteen persons in attendance. The first three or four considered economics. The reason we got into economics first was that a visit to Raleigh by Hazel Henderson was then in prospect. We thought, correctly as it turned out, that Mrs. Henderson was on "our frequency" so to speak, and we could get some reinforcement for a view of life which was illuminated by considerations of the entropy process.

When you get to talking economics you inevitably consult with professionals in the field and that's what we did, only to find that no economists, available to us, viewed the entropy process as an important factor in evaluating conditions. There are such economists - Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly, E. F. Shumacher, Richard Heilbroner - but they get short shrift in the Raleigh area. The Adam Smith-Herman Kahn-Milton Friedman school predominates here, as it seems also to do in Washington. Proponents are generous with their time in defending that view and eloquent also. I accuse them of being short sighted and they accuse me of ignoring history.

Not to belabor that too much but in an attempt to underscore the view of this Center, I want to state over again that the human does not live on this earth as some sort of master free to anything he wants with the various components that make up life and low entropy stuff. The human is by the earth, and of the earth and he is no less for the earth than any of the other phenomena. That being the case, he has an obligation to the earth. So what is that obligation? Well, that's the question we ought to try to answer and that's the question many economists ignore and I think they ought not to. (I offer Dick Sylla some of this space to respond.) My emphatic position is that the human has an obligation to consume low entropy as slowly as he can, not as fast as he can, which is what happens when you maximize production and productivity.

In that view of the human which seeks to find values expressive of living so as to cooperate with and foster the natural, one is horrified, utterly revolted, by a chemical dump leaking its poison into the ground. And every time he passes a bulldozer he thinks of it assaulting trees. How many bulldozers are there? And how many acres of trees must each destroy per year in order to be "economical"? And they keep on making more and more and more bulldozers.

Hardly anyone seems to have a system which would accomodate on a sufficiently large scale with the human obligation to live in harmony with the earth. Are we finally and irrevocably locked into a system which survives only at the cost of destroying the natural world? It may be that historically the human has been better off in each succeeding generation as the orthodox economists tell us (there is room for doubt about that), but even if it is so, never before has the water and the air and the soil been so threatened, and if those are not the realities of life then nothing is. And never before have there been hugh stockpiles of nuclear weapons, the final testimony to the contempt some have for the earth God gave us.

Must our wildlands be turned over to the moneymakers? Must we extinguish forever the whale and the hawk and the mountain lion and innumerable other forms and shapes of natural beauty that the moneymakers have no love for? What gives the moneymakers such enormous power over our lives and the lives of God's creatures? Will well water everywhere soon carry the poison the chemical giants have dumped in a hundred thousand dumps? Why do we welcome to North Carolina, the company which filled the Hudson River with PCBs? Hasn't North Carolina had enough of the criminals who dump that poison into the environment?

The Second Law study group in the second phase of its activities is turning to philosophers and naturalists and poets in its search for a set of values responsive to the human obligation to live in harmony with the earth. In two sessions we have talked about Teilhard de Chardin's Phenomenon of Man, and in the last session we talked about Thomas Berry's three basic principles of the Universe at all levels of reality; Differentiation, Subjectivity and Communion. In our next session we are going to examine into Henry David Thoreau's Walden, some of Whitman's poems and some of Emerson. Readers of this circular are encouraged to read those things.

Men frequently say to me, "I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially." I am tempted to reply to such, -- This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting house, the grocery, Beacon Hill or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction. This will vary with different natures, but this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar . . . I one evening overtook one of my townsmen, who has accumulated what is called "a handsome property," - though I never got a fair view of it, - on the Walden road, driving a pair of cattle to market, who inquired of me how I could bring my mind to give up so many of the comforts of life. I answered that I was very sure I liked it passably well; I was not joking. And so I went home to my bed, and left him to pick his way through the darkness and the mud to Brighton - or Bright-town, which place he would reach some time in the morning.

From the chapter Solitude out of Walden.

March 26, 1981 - Study group discusses Wendell Berry's The Unsettling of America. Agnes McDonald leads.

(date subject to change)