

We must deal with the earth on the earth's terms

THE CENTER FOR REFLECTION ON THE SECOND LAW

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AN APPEAL TO ECONOMISTS

Please take note of the following:

- A recent issue of TIME Magazine was devoted entirely to describing the magnitude of the ecological crisis.
- A recent issue of SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN did the same.
- NEWSWEEK, June 5th of this year did an article on the ecological crisis and Thomas Berry's "theology of ecology".
- US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT did a full two page spread on the Greening of the Church in its issue of November 27, 1989 - "The clergy are beginning to view ecological concerns as central to their mission"
- The North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, in collaboration with Earth Day organizers, is working with several denominations on programs relating to Earth Day, 1990. An Earth Day message will go to tens of thousands of churches.
- Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, a minister of the Reformed Church in America and director of the World Council of Church's subunit on Church and Society has written a five page article titled PRESERVING THE EARTH for the magazine ONE WORLD, issued by the World Council of Churches.
- The Pope's 1990 New Year's message for the Roman Catholic Church's World Day of Peace is devoted entirely to the environmental crisis and includes this statement, "...simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few."

Many other signs could be listed which prove that alarm over the poisoning and polluting of the earth is rising, and will soon be a strong influence on the behavior of very large numbers of people. Without exception those who seek to defend the earth from the devastation that current economic practices impose on it, plead with people to live simply and to give up consumerism. One very important development is the arrival of the churches on the scene. We will be hearing the message of ecology from pulpits, in the very near future, emphasizing, for the segment of our society that sits in pews on Sundays, that it is the wish of the Lord that rivers run clean and clear, that oceans be unspoiled, that soil be rich and deep, that air be pure and that wilderness and wildlife be honored and protected as a sign of divine perfection. This is powerfully reinforced by the fact that unless these conditions prevail our children will be doomed to a miserable existence.

The new age, the Ecological Age or what Thomas Berry likes to refer to as the Ecozoic Age, is replacing the Industrial Age, the Mechanical Age, the Modern Age, or whatever, with a speed that is going to leave us all breathless and unequipped to react, unless we get to thinking about it and inventing an economic system that will provide for the well being of both the human and the other life systems of earth.

I am no economist, at least in the sense of having received formal training. But I feel qualified to make some comments: Constant economic growth can not be sustained and must be abandoned as a goal. "Sustainable" and "steady-state" are the watch words in the Ecological Age. When a sizeable segment of the population adopts simplicity and moderation as guides for lifestyle, the present economic system of consumerism will collapse. This must be prepared for. One approach is shown in the following paragraphs.

The first law of economics is, "Preserve the source" or in Wendell Berry's biblical analysis, "The inflexible rule is that the source must be preserved. ... You may eat the harvest, but you

must save seed, and you must preserve the fertility of the fields." (page 273, *The Gift of Good Land*). If formal economic analysis is unable to deal with this, having defined such as "externality" or having declared itself value-free, then I am talking to the wrong people. Even so, as philosophers, you are obliged to see the connection, to see the dangers we confront, and to bring your skills to bear.

The second law of economics, as I see it, must deal with distribution. All creatures, including the human must have access to the necessities of life and to a habitat that is natural to them.

The third law of economics must relate to land. The earth is, in absolute fact, a commons. This is not only true of air and water, it is true of the land. Ownership of land can only be allowed with constraints that make it impossible for the few to exclude the many from its benefits. The land is not a place for the enrichment of the clever, the powerful and the unscrupulous. No one and no agency, no corporation may destroy the land or render it incapable of fulfilling its function as location and habitat and support for humans, for a wide diversity of life forms and for recirculating and purifying water and air; nor may they destroy its function as revelation of the divine.

The fourth law relates to work. The purpose of work must be to assure the well-being of humans and to assure the well being of the earth. A primary reason for the human presence in creation and for human work must be understood as closely connected to the success of the human species and the success of creation itself. In order to grasp what that means, think of the fact that human activity is, right now, very close to assuring the shut down of earth's life systems which can only mean the failure of the human endeavor and the failure of the earth. We cannot let our work bring this about. Work may be divided into two categories: work that ought to be done and work that ought not to be done. Work that ought to be done is work that makes for human and earth well-being. Work that ought not to be done is harmful to the earth and the earth's life systems and must be eliminated.

So, what must economists put themselves to work accomplishing? They must invent an economics system that:

Provides for the needs of the human and the non-human population without doing harm to the earth. This means minimum production and minimum consumption. This means the invention of a work system and a distribution system that is effective and just, as well as one that gains the loyalty of those who work in it and benefit from it. This means guaranteed income and guaranteed work, and a taxation system that makes that possible.

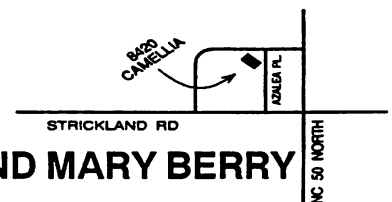
Provides for the healing of the earth through human work and cooperation with the earth's recuperative powers. This means the adoption of practises and technologies that heal and restore soil, water, air and wilderness.

Revises the laws of ownership and custody of land to support the above.

This may look like a monumental task, but something like it was done at the beginning of World War II, when a ration system appeared overnight controlling the distribution of food, gasoline, tires, and many other items. We are faced with a crisis that dwarfs the crisis of 1941.


* * * you are invited * * *

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