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THE LAUCKS FOUNDATION

from time to time calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification or understanding of issues affecting world peace. The accompanying reprints constitute Reprint Mailing No. 109.

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Pages 2 to 6, inc. of this Reprint Mailing are devoted to the transcript of the presentation "How Ecological is Planetary Management?", by Dr. Wolfgang Sachs, of Wissenschaftszentrum NRW, Essen, Germany, made at the symposium ECOLOGY: IN SEARCH OF A NEW ETHOS, sponsored by Laucks Foundation on October 30, 1989, at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Transcripts of the presentations of Congressman George E. Brown, Jr. ("Technological Stewardship or Exploitation"), and former Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. ("The Cross Pressures of Ecology and Technology: the Political Dimension"), will appear in forthcoming issues of the Reprint Mailing.

HOW ECOLOGICAL IS PLANETARY MANAGEMENT?

by

WOLFGANG SACHS

As I prepared last week, I wanted to make a distinction between an ecology of means and an ecology of ends, and somehow identify what an ethical discourse could be. But then I came across this September 1989 issue of *The Scientific American*. It is a special issue, which is very rare in the history of *The Scientific American*, entirely devoted to the theme "Managing the Planet Earth."

Now, I said to myself: Wait a minute. Today it seems everybody proclaims himself an environmentalist to the point that the most quoted environmentalist in the last half of this year is Margaret Thatcher. So I told myself: Something is wrong here. We have to be more careful. We have to come up with new distinctions. It might even happen that people will begin to talk about ethics in an inherently unethical context.

In considering this, I threw overboard what I had planned to say and thought I should instead comment on this lead article in *The Scientific American* entitled "Managing Planet Earth." What I would like to do is suggest six comments to you. The real thread of my comments on this article by William Clark is that I am afraid at this moment there is a new discourse on environment emerging, used by Margaret Thatcher, by the World Bank and others, which might undermine what we are groping for—a new ethic.

Governor Brown [former Governor Edmund G. Brown] said ethos means to live within your limits—to live in a gracious way within your limits—and in my view, that has to do with how to <u>be</u> in a place. It has to do with how to relate in a community. It has to do with listening to stories, and it seems to me that there is a discourse emerging which runs counter to these intentions. This discourse has a guiding image: the image of planet earth.

Of course, this is the new icon of our age. It's this picture shot from outer space of planet earth. This has created a new reality. We see something in front of our eyes which we were never before able to see. In a sense, we now <u>have</u> a planet. We see there's an object. Until now, we knew we were somehow inhabiting a larger whole, a larger context, but you could not see this larger context as an object in front of you. Of course, now any environmental report has this icon on the cover, as does this issue of *The Scientific American*. The image declares that the planet is the overwhelming reality of our times.

1.

To take one random quote: The problem, the text says, is that "It is as a global species that we are transforming the planet. It is only as a global species...that we have any prospect for managing the planet's transformation along pathways of sustainable development."

The first perspective that is given you is the whole earth, the one earth. It's the construction of one world. What they say is globaloney, that we should engage in globaloney, that in global terms we are all becoming equal, the threat of catastrophe is the grand equalizer, that the vicious cycles have planetary dimensions, and, of course, that pollution doesn't know any borders. Pollution doesn't carry a passport; it doesn't apply at the immigration office, so, we are called upon to listen to a planetary sense of a shared destiny.

At first, it seems to be the basis of a new ethos. If you take a second look—if you ask yourself what happens if you look at the planet in those terms—you see that all kinds of distinctions fade away. Nations fade away. The differences between people, what they hope for, what they aspire to, fade away. Cultures vanish. Cultures become even more ornamental, and we get a situation where everybody is called on to be like everybody else. It is as if now, finally, it's not the enlightenment hope to create one mankind under the flag of reason, but one mankind is finally created under the fear of catastrophe, and this is a menace, it seems to me. It is here, if we begin to think in those terms, that we create a kind of homogeneous political space on the globe. And I think that this is a long-term threat to a sense of place. Because the more we begin to think of ourselves in terms of everybody being the same, because he is sitting on this planet, the less it becomes possible to really get deep into our sense of place and to know about and to be proud about being steeped in a place; and that, I think, has something to do with ethics.

2.

The second point. Talking about people, the article goes on: "Sooner or later, as the bacterial populations deplete available resources and submerge in their own wastes, their initial blossoming is replaced by stagnation or collapse." It also says that people are called global species. That is another tendency I observed. You have the global earth Now, what do you call these people living there? You call them species. You even compare them to bacteria. You might even reason about them in terms of some very *avant garde* biology being the host for microbes, nothing else.

So, the notion of the citizen disappears. People are turning from citizens into species. People are turning from people to populations. Again, a biological term. You don't talk about how you want to live, about the quality of life. You talk about survival, again, a biological term. So it seems to me there is a significant shift taking place in articles like that. It's biological reductionism—that whatever humans are and what they want is dissolved in a talk about species. Political distinctions, what people are, what citizens want, how they want to live, are somehow flattened out into words of population, species, and survival. So political distinctions evaporate, and, also in such a situation, a moral discourse cannot gain ground, because how can you reason morally about microbes? You have to talk about people with judgment and responsibility and aspirations. The more you lose the language, the more difficult it becomes to talk ethically.

3.

In all documents like this, of course, you find calls for action to secure our survival. Everybody will set off the alarm and tell you we have five minutes to twelve. Now, that might be true. I don't debate that. However, I am not so sure that securing survival can be the prominent imperative. Did we ever have a history, a society, which made its primary goal to secure its survival? Sure, people had the plague and there were the battles of Verdun, so people had to fight for survival, but I do not know of any society that would put striving for survival as a first goal in society. You would build gothic cathedrals, you would build pyramids, you would have large achievements. Survival would be sometimes endangered, yes. But basically, it was a given banality. It was not a matter of great concern. And I am always struck by this paradox—that at the moment when we have amassed wealth as never before, people from the four corners of the world call upon us to put survival first.

It seems to me that there is an implication which I would like to draw to your attention. A World Resources Institute Report begins with this sentence, "All humankind is an interconnected web, therefore, we have to manage it wisely." I would like you to ponder that sentence a minute. Yes, of course, humans live in an interconnected web. I would think that, more or less, any culture knew that. There are many, many different expressions to say that. But the conclusion, I think, is very peculiar to us that, therefore, we have to manage it wisely! Of course, you have to manage the interconnected web only if it is always in danger, otherwise you don't have to manage it. Only if it becomes scarce. So, the moment you speak in that way, you assume that our air, our soil, our water, will always be in danger and under threat. So, it seems to me, language that says we have to manage and to secure our survival seals the fact that we always are driving growth right to the abyss and you can call for survival as a long-term goal only if you accept that we will always test the limits of nature, that we always have to manage so that the testing doesn't go overboard. The consequence is that we need to have experts who watch our course in a way that helps us steer the course of industrialism right along the abyss without falling into it. You do not ask yourself: Do you want to go to the edge of the abyss? But: How can I avoid falling in? It seems to me there is still the idea of the iron law of growth at work. People talking about survival have nothing left other than talking about survival, because they have already accepted that infinite growth is an iron law.

4.

Experts over the last forty or fifty years have claimed to preside over our welfare. Now, experts are going to preside over our survival. That's the point I would like to emphasize. But just so you know I'm not talking about fantasies—here, in this article, at the end, the author states what we have to do. Of course, national politics is out, but he says, "The immediate need at the international level is for a forum, in which ministerial-level coordination of environmental management activities can be regularly discussed and implemented. As in the

case of economic policy, the existence of such a formal, high-level government summit on global issues of environmental development..." and so on and so on. What you come up with when you think of the planet of species, of survival, is world government bodies. You begin to look into new agencies of protection and of control. I see a danger here that we get a new reason of state—that is, why do states exist? There have been many answers. States exist in order to secure peace and order. Later on, in the early Twentieth century, one would say, "States should be there in order to care for some redistribution, to secure welfare." Then, after the Second World War, most Third World governments were built on the premise that the reason of state was to care for development. It seems to me that we are today moving into a situation where survival is proclaimed as a reason of state. So the state is called upon to secure survival. And I must confess that I feel very uneasy about that, because, did you ever see a more daunting, a more compelling reason for intervention into people's lives than survival?

5.

Let me get to my fifth point. Again, I will quote this article. My fifth point is: If you talk about survival, you express the desire that you live and not how you want to live. And I think that is a very basic difference. And the more one talks about survival, the more a discussion, a debate, about how to live can go overboard. Now, I would like to hark back to what Wes says. [Wes Jackson. See Reprint Mailing No. 108.] I think that there is a theory coming up which will provide the epistemological basis for intervention—the ecosystem theory. If I take up what Wes said, I would even submit that ecosystem theory is an organicist version of Cartesianism and Baconianism, although I know it sounds paradoxical. But it is like that. And now the quote from the article: "Although our knowledge of the earth system is...expanding, we do not yet know enough about it to say with any certainty how much change the system as a whole can tolerate or what its capacity may be for sustaining human development." (Which means human action.) And that's exactly the question ecosystem theory comes along to answer.

If you read *Newsweek*, if you read *Time Magazine*, they all work on the image that nature out there is an ecosystem—in fact, many, many interlocking ecosystems. The idea is, more simply: Nature is like a thermostat which regulates itself. There might be disturbances and there is a certain tendency toward homeostasis, and there are adaptive mechanisms of self-regulation. The metaphor behind this—as in any systems theory—is the metaphor of the self-governing machine. (By the way, the ecosystems theory, as a concept, was further developed in the famous Macy Conferences between 1947 and 1953, which have been extremely important for the rise of computer science and information theory.)

The point of theorizing a self-governing machine is to gauge the overload capacity of a machine, because you want to know how it regulates itself in order to see how it can be driven. Epistemologically speaking, I don't talk about the intention of people who use it, but of the history of the conflict inherent in talk about ecosystems, because, again, you ask yourself the same question as my author does. You ask yourself:

How will nature respond to our actions? You try to gauge your overload capacity. You try to predict what the effects of the action will be, and you try to examine, to manage, to monitor your actions in order to keep it one step away from the abyss. I also feel that thinking of ourselves and of nature in those terms of ecosystems does not help very much toward an ethical discourse.

6.

And let me make my sixth point, in order to keep my promise to have six points. Now, if we go into managing planet earth, we've got a problem. The problem is people. Here my author says, "It will be helpful to recall the extraordinary range of local circumstances that will have to be dealt with if the human transformation of the planet is to be steered along paths of sustainable development." If management means—if thinking in ecosystems means—as my author calls it, "adaptive planetary management," the guiding principle is preventive optimization. You try to get the best out of your actions and at the same time avoid falling into the abyss. You try to increase your efforts of prevention, to increase your efforts of prediction, forecasting the possible risks and managing them, and in that way synchronizing society's gestures in order to avoid falling into the abyss. Again, I see that we move into a situation of a global ecocracy, which says what is to be done to preserve resources, to develop resources, to care for forests, to do with waters, and so on. And that tends to clash with what people locally would like to do. It tends to clash with what people locally see in water or see in a forest. It is by no means said that you have an identity of interest between global ecocracy and local people.

I would like to give to your consideration that there might be a language emerging, a perception emerging, that might even make it more difficult to talk ethically, in the sense of ethics as a way to live within our limits, as a way to rediscover a sense of place, a sense of bondedness—telling stories about where we come from and where we want to go. On the one hand, we get more and more a language which is full of bio-bias. We talk about populations, survival, species. The bio-bias however, makes fade away what people value, what people strive for, what people's interests are, what people's utopias are.

On the other hand, we get more and more a language which is full of techno-bias. We ask ourselves: How can we make it? How can we avoid the catastrophe? How can we improve our capacity of prediction and prevention? This way we turn ecology, that once was a call for new public virtues, into a set of managerial strategies. And it seems to me that if we do that, it makes it more and more impossible to do what ethics is about—namely, to discuss what is right and what is wrong, to discuss what is good and what is bad, to understand what is beautiful, what is ugly, to see what is natural and what is artificial. And all of that would go down the river. And this was not what I had in mind as I began somehow to put myself on the line of an ecological commitment.

The following is an excerpt from "The Unfinished Revolution", the first article of the first issue of MANAS, the unique and remarkable weekly founded by Henry Geiger, the self-educated philosopher who, for over 40 years, almost single-handedly wrote and published it.

"Manas," he stated when he launched it, "is a journal of independent inquiry, concerned with study of the principles which move world society on its present course, and with search for contrasting principles—that may be capable of supporting intelligent idealism under the conditions of life in the twentieth century."

To the deep regret of his many admirers, Henry Geiger died last year and the publication of MANAS ended.

This excerpt, from the January 7, 1948 issue, is followed on the next two pages by others from MANAS:

It takes no special faith in man to believe that underneath the protective shell of cynicism worn by most people of today, there is a secret hoping for the birth of unashamed idealism in human life. It is as though there were an unspoken cry, lodged in the throat of millions: "What shall we believe in?—What can we work for that will mean something and will last?"

There are answers, of course—too many answers, and too few of them credible...

We have, in short, no creative thought today; only formulas. We have no genuine religious inspiration; only creeds. And we have no real science, in its highest sense, but only advanced technology. And finally, we see no uniformities of moral experience in terms of which a Thomas Paine could write the challenge of these times. . . . So, it is plain, while we need a Tom Paine for today, we need also something more. We have to come to grips with the moral realities of our lives, in order to have ears to hear what the Paines born to this generation may say.

The following excerpt is from "The Quick and the Dead", MANAS, June 1, 1949, Vol. 11, No. 22:

OUR present civilization is tending to go to pieces. While people have said things like this in every generation, usually they have meant, not civilization itself, but their particular life of comfort and convenience. To say that civilization itself is going to pieces is to assert that the *principle* of civilization is dying out of a system of social life that has built up over centuries. And this, we think, is true of our present social system.

What is the "principle" of civilization? Many definitions might be offered, but the one that seems most pertinent is that a civilization is a consciously constructed series of human relationships which provide for the best possible development and expression of the potentialities of human beings. A Declaration of Independence, a Constitution, a public school system—these are instruments which men devise to increase the values of their civilization. The Bill of Rights defines certain human relationships for the purposes of civilization.

Fundamentally, a civilization must always embody some affirmative postulate about the nature of human beings. The civilization of the United States is based upon the proposition that men are by nature free—and this means, for practical purposes, that freedom of choice in as many directions as possible is a good that should be preserved and guarded and extended. Certain limitations on this human freedom are naturally conceded to be necessary, so that the question arises, How shall these limitations be administered? The answer, according to our civilization, is that limitations on freedom shall be defined by impersonal law. On what shall the law be based? On the idea of the equality of all men before the law. This is the equivalent of saying that the law shall be just. Justice and freedom, therefore, are complementary ideas. Justice sets limits to freedom, but it also secures the freedom that has not been limited. The idea of justice is the guarantee that no man's freedom will be interfered with arbitrarily—without a *reason* that is connected with impersonal law. And behind all limitations of particular human freedoms must be the purpose and practical effect of increasing general human freedom as a result.

These are the equalitarian and libertarian principles of Western civilization. They spring from the idea of man as a moral agent who finds his ultimate good in self-determining behavior and what growth is possible to him through self-determination. The implied postulate is that man cannot really grow in any other way.

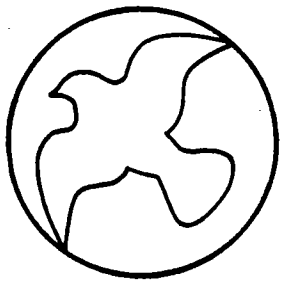
Why, then, is our civilization tending to go to pieces? Because we have developed and largely accepted a doctrine of progress which is absolutely opposed to this sort of human freedom—a doctrine which requires, for its successful application, the practical destruction of this sort of human freedom. Accordingly, we are faced with a dilemma: Either we continue to "progress" and lose what freedom we have left, or we preserve and increase our freedom by changing our idea of progress.

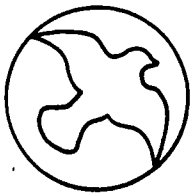
What is the doctrine of progress which threatens our freedom? It is the doctrine that technology can make the world over into a Utopia—that scientific knowledge is the same thing as wisdom.

The following excerpt is from "Education Versus Disaster", MANAS, August 3, 1949, p.6:

ONE of the consequences of building a technological civilization is that all its major problems eventually become moral problems. This is probably true of every civilization, as it moves toward maturity, but the idea should have special value for people living in a technological age, for the reason that technology, on the surface, seems to have nothing to do with morality.

Technology has certain obvious effects upon society. It brings people closer together in their material lives. It takes up the slack of distance between communities and individuals and makes them feel the impact of the actions of one another. But this impact is impersonal rather than individual, for a second effect of technology is that men no longer do little things by themselves, but each man does a small part of very big things. The impact is impersonal for the further reason that fewer and fewer people "do" anything at all, in the sense of origination or independent accomplishment. Technology makes them part of a process which goes on and on, getting more complicated year by year, until, in some cases at least, the process itself rules over human choice.





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