

Environmentalism vs. Technology

Conflict or Unity?

by William F. Brinton

I stand before this graduating class and picture setting out once myself, even as you do today. I recall a similar moment 15 years ago, determining my own future in environmental practice. In a way I envy you. For those of you choosing an environmental career, you have before you a world ready to receive your environmental impulse. You have opportunities galore — an EPA, DEPs in every state, and an environmental consulting industry that will grow by \$40 billion in the next five years alone. As Senator Kerry has said, "There is a critical shortage of specialists in environmental management. ..." Let's face it; you are in the right place at the right time.

When once I sat in a dean's office and described the training I sought — as a matter of fact, I outlined a career in the developing science of organic farming — I was told, "Son, we don't teach that here." I appealed to an advisor with my plan to launch a laboratory to provide services for farmers wishing to become independent of chemicals. I was told this was a foolish proposition. My motto was to become what Aldo Leopold stated in his *Sand County Almanac*:

"The art of land doctoring is being practiced with vigor, but the science of land health is yet to be born."

To be able to actuate a science of land health! The idea drew me like a lodestone. The lack of support for what I desired to study caused me to go far afield. Unusual people helped me with advice and told me stories. Albert Schatz helped direct me. I ended up pursuing some of my studies at European institutions, which in the Seventies were breaking ground in new research modalities for environmental agriculture. There, the first semi-official programs in biological farming, as it was then called, were established — nearly a decade before

sustainable agriculture programs were established in American institutions.

Oh, such an amount of effort and energy was required to sustain my dream. I envy you students setting out today, since I imagine that you can go much further with the tools and support you are given!

Yet, consider, at the same time, that you face a world with a pre-formed environmental movement. This I had not. Facts, services, and positions have been determined before you, without your input. To grow in creativity you need original impulses; you need to connect to sources. My sources were the people and processes I encountered in the troubled and chaotic Seventies.

Allow me to tell you a story. It is a story of courage and despair. Not my own, but a story that was told to me and which deeply impressed me. It is a story of New York, of Maine, and of the world. You may know the name of the one-time Vietnam War activist and America's favorite family doctor, Benjamin Spock. No less an activist was his less well-known sister, Marjorie, a resident of Maine for the past 25 years, teacher, writer, and organic farmer. I worked on her farm along the coast of Maine after high school, when I was looking for direction. This is really her story, though she would tell you it is not. It is the story of the gypsy moth; it is the story of our environmental beginnings.

It all started in the summer of '57 in the garden behind her Brookville, Long Island home. Airplanes roaring low overhead — 14 times to be exact — doused the countryside with a sticky, oily substance that adhered to plant surfaces, bark, automobiles, and soils. It was kerosene impregnated with DDT. Two women — Marjorie and her friend, the late Theodora Richards, singer, musician, and philanthropist — had labored years to develop a pristine organic garden and

orchard. Suddenly they found the crops inedible if only for the kerosene that coated everything, let alone the DDT content. Despite their urgent requests to be notified of the imminent sprayings, planes came suddenly with no consideration paid to the public.

Audaciously they resolved to bring suit against the United States Government and the State of New York. Some of their friends abandoned them. This was not done in 1957! Firmly resolved, they enlisted the likes of their neighbor Archibald Roosevelt and ornithologist Dr. Henry Cushman Murray, forming a group of 13 plaintiffs. They assembled lawyers, constitutionalists, and what few scientists they could find who would speak out regarding practices they believed were unwarranted, unstudied, trespassing, and damaging.

While defendants affirmed virtually all the facts stated by the plaintiffs, the Eastern District Court dismissed the action. On appeal and 33 volumes of testimony later, a process taking nearly three years, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 2nd Circuit vacated the demand for injunction and dismissed as moot all charges. The battle was lost. ...

But one day, during the testimony that dragged on week by week, into months, a slightly built woman slipped into the back of the court room. She took some notes and left without discussion. Two days later, Marjorie Spock related to me, a telegram arrived from this woman requesting copies of all testimonies for her review and study. What could they lose? And so each week they bundles off another set of volumes. In the meantime the plaintiffs appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which refused to hear their case. Writing a personal opinion, Judge Douglas was to reflect, "This could be one of the most important cases ever. ..." Could he have been right?

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Back to the mysterious court room visitor. Her name was Rachel Carson, and building on testimony and much more, she developed her book *Silent Spring*, published shortly thereafter in the summer of '62. The battle had been lost, but the war had been won.

Today, more than 30 years later, are there any battles left to be fought? Numberless suits, injunctions, damages, penalties, and the like have come and passed for the environment. Environmental litigation became the tool of the trade. In a way, society has avenged those early plaintiffs. Government and industry subjected that group of 13, and later Rachel Carson, to extraordinary ridicule, criticism, and discrediting. Shortly thereafter, Rachel Carson succumbed to cancer and died, even while many in the world echoed charges against her, and I quote: "bird-lover," "environmentalist," and "pseudo-scientist." As one writer commented, "... it was an education in perfidy to read their blasts. ..." Marjorie Spock told me, "We did not ourselves claim to be scientists, but we argued for scientific sanity." A tune familiar to us today.

Perhaps ultimate scientific sanity has been achieved in the modern environmental movement. If so, your challenge is easy. Which brings me to my theme. Before you is a world of environmental forces unlike anything Carson could have dreamed of. Yet, environmental development is not a finished affair, and I am here to say that you can become pioneers, as others have before you.

Today new warnings are heard. The language of environmental science is now spoken by industry. Confrontation is leading to consensus. A new form of ecology is upon us. Supported by high science, with an arcana of equipment in laboratories, it is eco-science, eco-technology. The eco-economy has been born. Products from industry are now "green" and food from transnational firms is "natural." Soil, water, and air resources are managed by a process of eco-science and regulated by eco-politics. So pervasive is eco-science and the complex regulatory mechanisms it gives rise to that an environmental writer has called it

"eco-crazy," that is, ecology bureaucracy.¹

Contrary to the beliefs of the early visionary ecologists and environmentalists, who pictured a new period of constrained, sensitive growth — Remember the Meadows Report, "Limits to Growth," issued in the early '70s? — industry today apparently has adopted the precepts of ecology without any discernible change in speed. More recently, however, environmental planners and thinkers warn of a deeper problem. Reading from an essay on development:

"There has rarely been a concept that represented nature in a form more abstract, passive, and void of qualities, as 'environment.' ..."²

Now we read statements from psychologists to physicists suggesting increased estrangement of people from nature, from observed reality.³ But wait! We are supposed to be living in the age of ecology.

Further, one writer warns:

"The Promethean task of keeping the global machine running at ever greater speed while safeguarding the biosphere will require a quantum leap in surveillance and regulation."⁴

This form of institutionalized, ecological industrialism is unique to the western nations and is relatively recent. Indeed, some now believe it to be an outgrowth of the same thinking that necessitated the court case in 1957 and the book in 1962.

What explains this situation? Why is it that, speaking about the threat to the global environment, Richard Groves writes in a recent *Scientific American* article:

"It is to be regretted that it has taken so long for the warnings by early scientists ... to be taken seriously."⁵

What force dissuades us? Let us look at the bigger picture; take a step back in time. Thoreau pointed to underlying effects of technology when he wrote in 1846, "... We do not ride upon the railroad, it rides upon us. ..." Hawthorne, only two years earlier, mused on the effect of industry, symbolized in the train intruding on his quiet homestead. Gazing upward at the clouds, he reflected, "...They look like shattered ruins of a dreamer's utopia. ..."⁶ The once pastoral America

transformed itself into a technological America and is now becoming eco-science America. In this regard, former President Bush said that "America leads the world. ..."

Now another story. This is my story. I traveled recently to Poland on request to explore development of environmental farming.⁷ I toured the country, met politicians, gave a lecture, and had a meeting with the minister of agriculture. Poland, as you may imagine from what you have been reading, is terribly polluted — smelters belching unscrubbed fumes, raw sewage floating in rivers, and so forth.

Some of this is true in specific regions where industry is located. But I also found something different. The countryside was pristine and pure — although I thought the air was not as clear as it could be. Further, I saw farmers everywhere spreading composted manure on their fields — nothing else.

Not only this, but many farms in Poland had never received any fertilizers or chemicals of any kind. Productivity of private lands was exceptional and the food was excellent. How could that be? Here I found, as in a time warp, the past in the present. But no, it was the future. Here was the sustainable farming we preach in the West; here were soils taken care of and fine-tasting vegetables. The Polish minister reminded me that the nation was essentially self-sufficient in food and, unlike the West, its farming was not subsidized.

Contingencies have been introduced, a Polish farmer-turned-businessman told me proudly, to allow them to receive western credit. "Thank you," he intoned to me. "The terms?" I asked. They must import American agri-chemicals and distribute them, I was told. I saw a list of the chemicals

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1. Wolfgang Sachs (1992) in *The Development Dictionary*, Zed Books, NJ.

2. Sachs (1992), op. cit.

3. See, for example, Joan Borysenko's *Fire in the Soul* (1993).

4. Sachs et al., op. cit.

5. Richard H. Grove, *Scientific American*, July 1992.

6. Mosses on Manses, Hawthorne, (1844).

7. See Brinton (1992), "Compost and Regeneration," *Orion* 11:36-44.

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and was mortified. Western advisors also stipulated that no experimentation with new methods was to take place. I implored the farmers to recognize the wisdom of their practices before discarding them, practices many of us have struggled for years to bring to recognition here in America.

Jacques Cousteau said of Polish rivers recently, that the pollution is obvious but different.⁸ It's not, he said, a complex brew of background chemicals hidden behind acceptable tolerance limits like we have in Europe and America, but "...just plain, simple pollution." I would agree. Extended into the countryside, we find in the East a land in a virtually natural, pre-industrial revolution condition. It contrasts sharply with the West's high technology coupled to eco-science. Could there be a lesson for all of us in this? Indeed, it's as though in the East we have an opportunity to do it all over again, and with all the new things we know now.

Modern western eco-science, intones one writer, "provides the epistemology of intervention" in nature. In the East where there are as yet no lawn mowers, lawns are immaculate, multi-tiered landscapes of fruits and vegetables, this peculiar construct is lacking and — thanks to the West — about to be lost. Instead of questioning the precepts of the continued extractive economy, as Wes Jackson puts it,⁹ we industrialize ecology itself!

The analogy between West and East may now be turned North and South. Environmental issues were explosive at the Rio summit. For one, the developing nations find that the North is using modern technical environmental contingencies to, in effect, control future development. In this sense, eco-science, the emerging global eco-cracy, appears as a threat in disguise, for it can become an extension of industrial colonialism, a new means of continuing the old control, but with new popular public support.

Is it then no wonder that we read in a recent *New York Times Book Review* article that "The developing nations ... are sick with contempt of us."¹⁰ These same nations appealed recently to a group of us for information on methods of composting to be used to

improve their wretched soils, desperately in need of life-giving humus. Concerning the ability of compost to renew soil, one representative said, "... You will find no argument with us." Data, science is hardly needed, he suggested, for "we know it here," and he gestured to his heart.¹¹ Thus, he placed ecology back into the human heart.

Thus, you students may have it harder now than I dreamt possible when I set out on an environmental path. The East and the South demand special care. In this amazing American-focused age of science, technology, and ecology, you must find the new meaning of technology itself. So, therefore, you must not take technology and science for granted, but do as my Polish and Honduran acquaintances do: Discover the essentially natural, nontechnical dialogue with nature and, using this understanding, build your edifice. This is the true environmentalism. You must, as students in America, find the unique balance, the unity between the environment and technology, and in this you will become masters in your field.

Be original! Environmentalism needs renewal. Science needs a human face. Do not expect it to be easy. It is as true today as ever, as British writer Alan McGlashan reminds us:

"The world is ungentle to those who speak the truth — but speak too soon!" ■

This article is based upon William F. Brinton's commencement address to the Class of 1994. Brinton, who is founder of Woods End Research Laboratory and renown for his work in compost methodology, was recognized by Unity College with an Honorary Doctor of Environmental Science in May of 1994.

8. Interview on the David Letterman Show, 1993.

9. See, for example, Wes Jackson, *The Extractive Economy*; The Land Institute (Salina, KS).

10. "The War of All Against All," *New York Times Book Review*, April 23, 1994.

11. U.N. Convention on Composting, Harrison Center, Glan Cove, NY; April, 1994.