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Catastrophe or Cornucopia: The Environment, Politics, and the Future, Stephen Cotgrove

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BOOK REVIEWS

CATASTROPHE OR CORNUCOPIA: THE ENVIRONMENT, POLITICS, AND THE FUTURE

By STEPHEN COTGROVE

New York: Wiley. 1982. Pp. xi + 154. \$35.95

The fundamental assumption—too seldom voiced—of what is called the conservation or environmental issue is that the human adventure on Planet Earth is worth preserving for as long as possible. Its roots in both Britain and the United States were deeply grounded in aesthetic insight; its expression as an economic, political, and scientific issue affecting social structure came later.

Stephen Cotgrove, professor of sociology at the University of Bath, with a doctorate from the London School of Economics, has employed the sampling techniques of his discipline to identify and measure divisions of interest and consequent pressures that are now visible. To this end he has queried five categories of political affiliation: 400 industrialists, 399 trade unionists, 567 environmentalists, 500 nature conservationists, and 1018 public, all chosen at random and with variable returns. The results are rated on a scale of six, from 1.4 left politically to 21.3 right and 5.8 no position, with the highest percent (47.3) mildly right. The results are then presented in a series of tables using standard statistical analysis.

An obvious reaction is to question the intensive treatment of what are relatively small samples. To my mind this is somewhat offset by the homely rejoinder of a middle-aged man whose younger wife insisted on his learning to play bridge, asking him what else could he do after he was seventy. His answer was "The best I can." So long as results are honest and not sloppy, they deserve respect when clearly put out as a target; this, to me, is at the heart of science. Further, since a characteristic of science writing in Britain is its usual clarity and respect for context, I must recommend *Catastrophe or Cornucopia* for deliberate study and digestion.

Meanwhile, some general comments may be drawn from some 24 tables and six figures plus 15 more tables in an appendix on questionnaire design and data analysis. As a starter, the list of contents deserves careful study for the variety of issues proposed for analysis. Next, a quick graph of the data in Table 1.2, p. 14, will show at a glance that the Catastrophists are essentially environmentalists and nature conservationists while the Cornucopians are the industrialists questioned, with a strong assist from the samples of trade union leaders and public.

In fact it is clear from the text that the various groups concerned in

one way or another with environmental problems are becoming involved with what might better be called ideological issues than philosophical principles. Perhaps this is inevitable in the search for political solutions. But the attention given by Cotgrove to values, classes, pro- and anti-science, technology, industrialism, market economy, and the general character of our culture shows that he is aware of what is going on.

The title of the book, *Catastrophe or Cornucopia*, reappears over a summary on pp. 119–120 just preceding the Appendix. Here we are reminded that the impact of science depends upon the framework of meaning and that the two opposing doctrines differ in their ‘trust’ of science and technology, with the ‘practical’ view of the apostles of plenty now dominant. It is therefore “that there are the gravest causes for concern . . . that the Cornucopians *may* be wrong” and the Catastrophists *might* be right.

With this I heartily agree. However, the statement about trust seems too brief. Membership on both sides of the controversy is a continuum, not a tight column. Catastrophists include many who regard the cause as an extra arrow in their quiver of general protest, rather than an issue of prime importance on its own merit. Among Cornucopians are industrialists who see the importance of maintaining a suitable environment into the distant future, i.e. genuine conservatives as well as those who scan and choose parts of science only for support of immediate profits. For example, a distinguished Connecticut industry has been criticized for setting a bad example by its expenditures to insure that its effluent water be clean.

Too long neglected is the fact that the same basic principles that apply to energy, materials, and life in designing an industrial process apply to the living landscape and its fitness to sustain life. The conservation movement that began from aesthetic insight now rests upon solid scientific principles. One has only to comprehend what exploitation has done to forest and grassland, soil, water, air, and minerals to know the costs of violating physical, chemical, and biological rules of experience.

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