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Introduction to Symposium on Whither Environmentalism

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INTRODUCTION TO SYMPOSIUM ON "WHITHER ENVIRONMENTALISM?"

Important public anniversaries such as the Bicentennial or the recent turning of the decade inevitably occasion a spate of commentary and analysis in the mass media. All too often the commentators' obligatory ruminations are all too predictable: a superficial review of events enlivened by a sprinkling of suitable quotes and salted with the latest clichés. Such will certainly be the case for the tenth anniversary of Earth Day which, at this writing, is three months away. No doubt much will be made of how the "environmental decade" has ended with environmentalists' goals in growing conflict with the nation's energy needs. We can expect numerous references to "embattled environmentalists" and to the movement's "maturity," and endless comparisons between the original Earth Day and its successor, Earth Day 1980. One hopes we will be spared disquisitions on environmentalism in the "me" decade and that the perjorative labeling of environmentalists as "the new class" (one of the vaguer and shallower of recent pop sociology categories) will already have run its course by April 1980.

Nevertheless, anniversaries are useful occasions for leisurely stock-taking—hence this symposium on "Whither Environmentalism?" By environmentalism we mean the set of ideas which emphasizes the interrelationship between humans and the ecosystem and the various threats human activity poses to its continued viability. Environmentalist thought takes various forms and its organizational embodiment, the environmental movement, is equally diverse, comprising as it does a remarkable array of groups at all levels of our society. The contemporary upsurge of "environmentalism" predated Earth Day 1970, but that media extravaganza both publicized its arrival and heralded its subsequent and considerable successes in the legislatures and courts of the land.

As befits the symposium's theme, the papers collected here look to the future, although they do so with varying degrees of intensity. The first two carefully review developments during the 1970s before venturing some prognostications about the 1980s. Richard Andrews' spirited defense of the environmental movement's positive contribution to the American political system over this time period concludes

with an admission that the “centralized corporate and political elites” who oppose environmental values now appear to have the upper hand. However, one senses an optimism on his part, as he concludes his paper, that environmentalists will heed the call to forge new alliances with potential allies such as consumers, workers, and small businesses and that pluralism will continue to flourish in the decade to come.

Whereas Andrews’ analysis is broad and sweeping, Thomas Gladwin’s is sharply focused on a single issue: environmental conflicts. It is also highly empirical, being based on an impressive compilation of information about more than 300 environmental conflicts in the United States during the 1970s. In addition to the specific predictions he makes on the basis of trends he finds in his data, Gladwin offers the general view that we are entering an era of intensified conflict and an era where the issues will be more and more concerned with the “primary” impacts—health, social, and economic—of industrial projects.

The inevitability of resource scarcity is a staple in modern environmentalist thought. Thanks to OPEC it is fair to say that these ideas are now much more widely appreciated by the public than they were in the early 1970s. Ironically, the confirmation of the environmentalists’ predictions appears, at the present time at least, to increase the credibility of those who earlier poo-pooed the notion of future scarcities and who now would circumvent environmental protection in the name of increased energy production even more than the credibility of those whose foresight was confirmed. That there is an energy/environmental crunch at the present time is obvious; what is not obvious is how it will work itself out in the coming years. The next three papers explore a future in which scarcity is a reality and ask, in effect, whether environmentalism in the steady state?

Denton Morrison takes the theme of soft technology, which is espoused by the alternative technology movement, and shows how and why this theme has been embraced by many environmentalists as a positive alternative to the demand for stepped up energy production. Bill Devall considers another stand of environmentalism, a body of profoundly utopian thought which espouses the idea that nothing less than a basic reorientation of humanity’s relationship to nature will suffice to save the ecosphere from otherwise inevitable destruction. While appropriate technology is headed in the “right” direction, much of it does not meet the demanding criteria of deep ecology, as Devall calls this school of thought, because the soft path accepts conventional science and asserts human dominion over nature, albeit more gently than its “hard” technology counterpart.

Frederick Buttel and Oscar Larson grasp the nettle of the symposium's theme the most strongly as they push bravely into the future. Taking scarcity as a given and using an analytical model of the United States' social structure, they attempt to specify the conditions under which environmentalism will assume one or the other political form.

Each of these scholars has approached his theme independently of the others. That there are common stands to their analysis will be obvious to the reader. Whether these areas of consensus signify wisdom or the blind working of a herd mentality among contemporary social scientists is a question whose full answer will have to wait the passing of our new decade. To evaluate these papers in the present we will have to rely on our intuitive understanding of American society and its changing character and/or on whatever relevant data may be at hand. As a contribution towards such an evaluation, in the symposium's last paper I draw on my recent survey of members of five of the major national environmental groups to answer the question: What constituency is there among this group of environmentalists for the soft path approach, greater involvement in deep ecology, and a leftward direction politically? Since the data were collected for other purposes the answers are necessarily tentative, but in the case of the soft path in particular, they are quite suggestive.

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