

Earth Read-out

Keith Lampe

1969

Continuation of a review: *The Population Bomb*, by Paul R. Ehrlich, Ballantine, 223 pp., 95 cents paper.

[For Part I see "Earth Read-Out," FE #86, August 21-September 3, 1969].

Part II: Doing Something About It

Ehrlich says: "A general answer to the question, 'What needs to be done?' is simple. We must rapidly bring the world population under control, reducing the growth rate to zero or making it go negative. Conscious regulation of human numbers must be achieved. Simultaneously we must, at least temporarily, greatly increase our food production.

"This agricultural program should be carefully monitored to minimize deleterious effects on the environment and should include an effective program of ecosystem restoration...The key to the whole business, in my opinion, is held by the U.S."

Okay. Ehrlich then makes several specific suggestions for controlling population:

1. Reverse income tax exemptions so that families with several children pay much more instead of much less.
2. Heavy luxury taxes on layettes, cribs, diapers, diaper services, expensive toys.
3. Cash bonuses or tax exemptions for delayed marriages, childless marriages, sterilization, etc.
4. Federal laws guaranteeing the right of any woman to have an abortion, the right of both sexes to be sterilized.

He then turns briefly to economics: "We've assumed the role of the robber barons of all time. We have decided that we are the chosen people to steal all we can get of our planet's gradually stored and limited resources. To hell with future generations and to hell with our fellow human beings today!" (Earlier he had reminded us that Amerika has only about one-fifteenth the world's population, but uses more than half its resources.)

Now that's a good characterization of the Amerikan economic animal—but Ehrlich does not venture specific proposals for transforming the economic machine. He does speak against a growth economy and asks for "legal steps...to see to it that polluters pay thru the nose for their destructive acts."

He seems resigned to capitalism: "The old idea that industry could create the mess and then the taxpayer must clean it up has to go...Keep the government out of business. Let it play its proper role in a capitalistic society—seeing to it that the interests of the fishing industry are not subordinated to those of the petrochemical industry, seeing

to it that your right to swim in a public lake is not subordinated to the desire of a steel company to make an inflated profit.”

How does Ehrlich resolve his acceptance of capitalism with his acceptance of Lynn White’s view that “the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not?” Somebody has to come forward with a whole new ism. (Certainly Marxism isn’t enough: ecologically, it doesn’t make any difference whether you rape the planet in the name of the people or in the name of the Rockefellers.)

Ehrlich entitles his next-to-last chapter “What Can You Do?” Because he is trying to reach a broad public, he starts at the very beginning:

1. Set an example; don’t have more than two children.
2. Write letters to “politicians and others in positions of power.” (He even includes six sample letters in an appendix.)
3. Organize action groups, which might compile blacklists of “people, companies, and organizations impeding population control;” organize boycotts; work for the opponents of guilty politicians; make speeches; phone talk-shows. Give your child an IUD to take to ‘show and tell.’ Above all, raise a stink!

This is as far as Ehrlich goes—but nobody should put him down for it. At this embryonic stage of an Ecology Transformation Movement none of these suggestions is a waste of time and many of them are fine. Ehrlich’s book contains information and perspectives important for all of us—and action-suggestions important for everybody who believes that normal democratic processes in Amerika still work. (Pretending that democratic processes still work might possibly bring a few of them back to life.)

The question remaining is what do we do—those of us in the subculture? The broadest answer is We do as much as we can without blowing our nervous systems too fast. It’s going to be a long, slow, painful transformation. Our lives—revocable at any time—have become a continuous rite-of-passage.

Probably the best way to sketch the present amorphous situation in the ecology transformation movement is to try a few comparisons with groups in older movements.

The Sierra Club and most other conservation groups correspond roughly to the NAACP or Urban League. “Conservation” is like “civil rights,” “ecology-action” like “black-liberation.” Dave Brower got kicked out of the Sierra Club for being too militant and with others he’s forming a group called Friends of the Earth.

The group in Berkeley called Ecology Action occupies a space farther out. When Cliff and Mary Humphrey ripped up their air-poisoning automobile (“it’s a pig”) and turned it into a piece of sculpture, it represented a brilliant act of conscience closely corresponding to the first draft-card burning.

The Marin County people who got busted blocking logging trucks on Bolinas Ridge had a spirit much like early SNCC. There are also large numbers of eco-guerrillas (Green Panthers?) already wise enough not to surface themselves into overground or underground media. (I mean these comparisons descriptively—not critically.)

Within that spread there’s a role for everyone. If you’re exhausted or your nerves are bad or you dig infiltration or dig masquerading in a necktie, join the Sierra Club for openers. Like food or clean air, it’s all good.

In another sense the ecology transformation movement is much like the peace movement at the height of the campus teach-ins. There’s much rapid circulation of information in an attempt to build a firm informational base. The information is so complex and bewildering that most people picking up on it are temporarily swamped and have trouble defining crisp actions for themselves.

Because the movement is so new, nobody in it is yet on a heavy ego-trip or power-trip. There’s a good chance such trips won’t develop at all: concern for all life forms of the whole nature is inherently religious or disinterested.

Since everybody is still groping for effective roles and tactics, people with widely different styles and widely different politics within the old context can talk to each other with no more tension than a Presbyterian talks to a Methodist. It’s possible for one seeker to say to another—without sounding patronizing or divisive—something like this: “Hey, you might be more helpful doing a non-hip, short-hair thing using academic or newscaster dialect.” That’s a refreshing change.

Meanwhile, righteous ecologic anger is mounting in many members of the National Rifle Association, the Birchers, the Minute Men. Right on.

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