Book Review: *Making Peace with the Planet*

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Barry Commoner, *Making Peace with the Planet*. Pantheon 1990

Beshrew thee, cousin, which didst lead me forth
Of that sweet way I was in despair!
By heaven, I'll hate him everlastingly
That bids me be of comfort any more.

Shakespeare, *Richard II*

The deficiencies of Barry Commoner’s decent and sensible book, *Making Peace With the Planet*, are all figured forth in its central metaphor. Commoner surveys the ecological desolation all around us and infers a “war between nature and man” (191), a “war between the ecosphere and the technosphere” (219). He would like to stop this war, not because it is immoral, arising out of base motives and fought for shabby ends, but because “the human attack on the ecosphere has instigated an ecological counterattack” (7). He wants peace, yes, but on terms favorable to the technosphere. He impugns the loyalty of some peace activists (notably those subversives of Earth First!) and warns that if we heed them, then “the tribute exacted by nature in . . . a peace treaty . . . would represent a defeat for human society” (192).

This persistent, chronic metaphor, developed from title page to concluding paragraph, betrays perhaps a deprivation of spirit and surely undercuts Commoner’s intent to be comprehensive and radical, to see the situation in its entirety and to get at the root of the problem. It is strange that a biologist does not envision nature, or Evolution, as creatrix of man, in which perspective the scene appears less like war and more like domestic violence: rape and gratuitous mayhem inflicted upon Mother. My intent is not exactly (or not only) to reproach Commoner for missing the aptness of my metaphor but to suggest that there are other ways of imaging our relationship to nature, ways that lead us away from the mean and narrow principles of Realpolitik. There are many varieties of religious (or reverential) and ethical and aesthetic conceptions of our intercourse with nature. Commoner has heard of these—but he repudiates them, mocks their sentimentality, their soft-headed concern for “the rights of other animal species (usually limited to furry vertebrates)” (171).

In essence, Commoner concedes the assumptions of the aggressors he opposes. The only question at issue is whether the greater “tribute” can be “exacted” through all-out war or through accommodation with the enemy—the familiar dispute of hawks and doves. Commoner’s radicalism does not get to the root of things. He comes close—but misses completely. In his final paragraph he says: “We can now see that both our suicidal assault on nature and the wars . . . that have engulfed the world in misery have a common origin” (243). And what is that common origin? I would say it is our *libido dominandi*, that Faustian compulsion to dominate, that drive to accept all challenges and climb all mountains because they are there, that repudiation of all limits.
But the "common origin" that Commoner points to looks like vapor and smoke: "the failure . . . to begin a new historic passage—toward a democracy that encompasses not only personal and political freedom, but the germinal decisions that determine how we and the planet will live" (243).

But let me turn to the virtues of this book and this man. For twenty years and more, Commoner has warned us, with infinite patience and cool reason, that the technosphere (human ingenuity transforming nature into commodities) is damaging the ecosphere, that "thin gaseous envelope that surrounds the planet," upon which human welfare depends (5). He is among the most high-minded exponents of that strain of conservationism often associated with the name of Gifford Pinchot: nature is regarded strictly as a resource, matter whose apportioned destiny is to be exploited by man—but efficiently, without undue waste, hence without the penalties that usually attend wantonness. In many books and articles Commoner warned of penalties incumbent upon the use of nitrates and pesticides in agriculture, the burning of fossil fuels, the discharge of man-made chemicals into air and water. We are familiar now with the dangers, imminent and long-term, of nuclear power. We know about strontium 90 in children's bones and of multiple poisons in mothers' milk. If the litany is familiar, thanks in large measure is due to Barry Commoner. And if we know of specific remedies, that is a further debt we owe Commoner.

I have read much of Commoner's work and as far as I can tell this latest book is altogether consonant with—an updating of—previous writings. He does not repeat himself, however. Not quite: old warnings and prophecies are now actualities which he documents. There it is, that hole in the ozone layer. There they are, those obdurate statistics on the increase of almost every pollutant in the air (except for lead). More acid rain. More eutrophication of surface waters (but less mercury). More poisons in fish. More dioxin in human fat (but less DDT). More trash to dispose of and more of it toxic. Despite all the political ferment, the twenty years since Earth Day have not been earth-friendly. I do not believe that anyone can deny the continuing degradation of the environment, though the apologists (together with some sincere optimists) are all around us.

Commoner's remedy remains the same. What now passes under the rubric of environmental action is punky to the very heart: it aims only at damage control, especially by determining optimum levels of pollution and degradation, and then enforcing limits. The aim is not a clean and salubrious environment but one in which the risks to human health are maximally compensated by economic returns. Commoner has many piquant observations about cost-benefit analyses, especially about who pays the costs and who collects the benefits; but the nub of his argument is that the limits on pollution are meaningless in the face of continued economic growth. A "control device always allows some pollution to enter the environment, so that increased productive activity negates the device's intended effect" (44). Commoner is not about to reappraise the dogma of growth, however. Instead, his solution is to eliminate—not merely limit—noxious emissions at the source, usually by adopting new, benign productive methods. In the case of lead, eliminating it from gasoline and other devices has not changed the gaseous discharge. The solution here, as in the redesign of other polluting equipment, is to return, not back as 1974 lead is instead redesign of paradigmatism. "The pollution in Lake Michigan, simply by the way, was chlorinated mercury" (45).

These examples are not the score, which is not the score, which is not the redesign of paradigmatism, natural, energy, ecology (193). Since we expect that the real post-war decade, a return to metal and not plastic, cotton and not farming, no transport, no technologies would, for example, deplete electricity by Commoner in feed crops without redoubling the used. As for the scale, sophisticated recycling.

None of the dogmas do not imply that compatible may assume that growth in such growth.
Warnings which he placed obdurately in his hole in the sludge (and whose obdurate persistence cost every pol lutant a dollar). More acid washes the soil surface waters (and poisons in fish, but less DDT). The old but more of it ferrets the ferment, the ferment which have not been checked. Though that anyone imagine the exitation of the faces of the apologists (optimists) are the same.

The rubric of environmental control has many cost-benefit the who pays the compensates is not be the face of conventional control device which to enter the corresponding productive "reduced effect" to reappraise itself. Instead, his who not merely but from the source, the productive remaining to eliminating it from gasoline has virtually eliminated it from the air. (In contrast, emissions control devices have not much reduced other pernicious discharges from automobiles. The solution here is to redesign the engines; such redesign is entirely feasible, since non-polluting engines have been tested as far back as 1974, says Commoner.) If the case of lead is instructive, that of mercury is a paradigmatic success story: Mercury pollution in Lake Erie has been sharply curtailed simply by changing the technology of chlorine production to eliminate the use of mercury (45).

These examples suggest the nature but not the scope of the proposed remedy, which is nothing less than the "[mass redesign of] the major industrial, agricultural, energy and transportation systems" (193). Since Commoner believes, astonishingly, that the really damaging technologies are post-war developments, his remedy implies a return to the past: soap, not detergents; metal and refillable glass, not disposable plastic; cotton and wool, not dacron; organic farming, not chemic agro-industry; rail transport, not trucks. But entirely new technologies would also be needed. For example, decentralized generation of electricity by way of photovoltaic cells. Also, Commoner would capture the solar energy in feed crops, translating it into ethanol without reducing the feed value of the crops used. As for trash, the solution lies in large scale, sophisticated, and perhaps subsidized recycling.

None of Commoner's proposals contest the dogmas of orthodox economics. They do not imply less consumption. They are compatible with an ever growing GNP and assume that human well-being follows upon such growth. Best of all, for capitalists, Commoner's schemes hold out the promise of even greater profits than current arrangements offer, if an honest accounting system were to measure real costs and internalize them. And all these innovations could be phased in over a period of 30 years, so that all extant capital goods could be amortized and no new capital needed, beyond replacement costs for obsolete and worn out plant and equipment.

No doubt, some of Commoner's particular recommendations might be disputed. But I suspect that no one will want to criticize him piecemeal, quarreling now with this statistic and now with that inference. For even granting the accuracy of his diagnosis and the sweet reasonableness of his remedy, there remains the intimidating question: who will impose the needed reforms upon the technosphere? Here Commoner is most vulnerable. If all his projects are eminently practicable, economically as well as ecologically, we might well ask what has prevented a headlong rush into the new order. Commoner's answer is that the corporate power structure serves its own purposes (such as short-term profits and control of markets), oblivious to long term social ends. Forget about consumer sovereignty, he says. Forget about a free market matching entrepreneurial activity to demand; in fact, it works the other way around. Commoner sees no unseen hand directing social institutions—corporations—to serve social interests. Therefore, society's political instruments must insist that corporations serve the public purpose. This, for Commoner, is the essence of socialism, and socialism so defined is the political precondition of the needed reforms of the technosphere.

Such, in breathless summary, is Commoner's message. This summary cannot
convey the decency, good will, and generosity of this book and this man. In his comprehensive outlook, his attempt to relate economics, technology, politics, and the welfare of fellow humans, there is a certain manliness; how different from the specialist, the part-time man speaking a part-time language. It would be fair to compare him with another selfless activist, Ralph Nader. Commoner is not only rational himself but generous in his faith in the rationality of people generally. This, alas, is an error, but one so endearing that were he to run for president again, again I would give him my vote, confident that the other candidates would mouth audience-based prose (lies calculated to flatter the basest passions of the people), while covertly serving the masters of the world. One should not mistake such a vote (or such a candidacy) for a political act, for effort intended to affect the course of events. It is only a self-regarding gesture of pride, a fastidious spurning of mass delusions. Commoner should know all this, remembering still after ten years a television reporter's question: "Are you a serious candidate or are you just running on the issues?" (233).

I will not now confront the larger question, whether reason guides and directs our passions, or is slave to them, whether philosophy affects social process, whether, in Auden's famous phrase, "poetry makes nothing happen." I rather doubt that works of intellect or art can alter human proclivities on such a scale as to affect political events; no doubt such works can be redemptive, but salvation and enlightenment remain personal, rare, profoundly anti-social. But we need not assume any answer to the general question in order to see that Commoner's book, however sensible, has no chance of affecting events. To propose that socialism is the answer, now when socialism seems totally discredited, now when capitalism seems to have put an end to history, now when all ideologies have dissolved like sentiments before the immutable natural law of self-interest—surely such unzeitmiteliness takes on sublime proportions. When now will society find the heart to tame the corporations and train them to serve a social purpose?

It's a small matter that Making Peace with the Planet fails to bring reason to a collective abstraction called "society", even great books fail to do that. But I find this book unsatisfying in its effort to "run on the issues," to be comprehensive and radical. It's a pity that a man so informed about both science and economics does not challenge economics where it is grounded in nature. (I assume now that economics is more than a description of changeable institutions, that it is based on laws of nature—an assumption that may itself be questioned.) In The Poverty of Power (1976), Commoner takes up the implications for energy production of the laws of thermodynamics. Since then, some economists have argued that these laws put a limit to economic growth—a theoretical limit, but of some relevance. I know nothing about thermodynamics and cannot follow the arguments, but the matter is interesting if not vital; so I wish that Commoner, with his knowledge and his wonderful intelligibility, had not so casually assumed that no natural laws can limit the works of human ingenuity. He tells us again that "Nature knows best," a principle that helps him justify organic farming, but he does not follow that awesome truth to its ultimate conclusions. After all, even an organic garden is an artifact.

Commoner resource, radical nothing but ever-long history on nature—a man today, among more notable sensibilities. Natural ethics help. None of this effect but it who wants to see the ecological writers of science can live a pleasant made world, wild things a connection to the might deny a our paleolife physiological man makes must be argued must be rise above the It does no goodness, that "a "sacred concert played by the music (192).

Economics death of nature guided by an even if man sympathetic there still remain exactly, are the growth. It is more of life having less doubles and my lifetime—
To propose that when socialism has ended, now when this all comes to an end to his­torical strategies have dis­placed the immutable, surely such un­measurable proportions. The heart to train them to

Commoner considers nature only as a resource, raw material to which we owe nothing but efficiency of use. But there is a long history of man's spiritual dependency on nature—a tradition still very much alive today, among nature poets, yet perhaps more notably among scientists of ranging sensibilities. And in Academe, environmental ethics has become a growth industry. None of this is likely to have any practical effect but it is of vivid interest to anyone who wants to understand the meaning of the ecological crisis. One might argue—and writers of science fiction often do—that man can live a perfectly fulfilling life in a man-made world, a space ship perhaps, without wild things and without any emotional connection to the biosphere that shaped us; one might deny any psychological kinship with our paleolithic forebears, who were physiologically identical to us, arguing that man makes himself. But such a position must be argued, not simply assumed; and to rise above the contemptible, the argument must be informed about what is being lost. It does no good to assert, with a haughty sniff, that "a symphony performed in an urban concert hall has a value not supplanted by the music of a lone shepherd's pipe" (192).

Economic growth means the eventual death of nature, the end of life processes guided by any hand other than man's. But even if man does not need wildness or a sympathetic connection with his ancestors, there still remains the question of what, exactly, are the human rewards of economic growth. It is too facile to say that "having more of life's necessities is better than having less" (192). As per capita GNP doubles and doubles again—three times in my lifetime—one might ask whether there is a proportionate increase in civility in the streets, in civic virtue in government, in loving-kindness, in aesthetic quality and intensity in our recreations, whether there is a proportionate diminution in anxiety, alienation, racism, recreational murder. I do not suggest that any of these is the proper measure of happiness and virtue. My point is that all measures of well-being and all definitions of "necessities" are rigorously excluded from economic calculations. If we want to exploit nature most efficiently, then I suppose we should demand a maximum output of happiness and virtue for a minimum input (or throughput) or raw material, hence minimum depredation upon nature. Not likely. On the contrary: since we regard nature as a resource, we are led to regard humans as "capital" or human resources (e.g., GVSU's Human Resource Office).

To discourse about such matters in this wise will not much affect events—but it offers satisfactions denied by Commoner's book, which will also fail to change anything. There is satisfaction, even a kind of grim pleasure, in refusing the comfort of illusory hope, not to mention the cheap promises of economic growth. If the technosphere is the necessary consequence of man's Faustian nature, if Evolution has given birth to a matricidal monster, if man will do whatever can be done because his genes tell him that action is the ultimate good—this is desperate news; but, as Richard II puts it, there is a kind of sweetness in acknowledging such news.

I sit here writing, in my warm study, my books within reach, a cup of coffee at hand. Outside, the snow is falling—a symbol of profound melancholy but beautiful too; inside, I have all the material comforts appropriate for a privileged member of a wealth-
thy industrial culture. It occurs to me that the sweet despair I comfortably enjoy might itself be an industrial artifact. That is possible. But maybe these comforts are anesthetic, numbing one's animal nature, making subjectivity abstract, cerebral. Maybe my internal life is not nearly as intense as that of a primitive hunter-gatherer. That too is possible, and maybe the avatars of reason will explain why one possibility is more probable than the other.

ANTHONY PARISE


Over the past two decades, students of Soviet history have watched with fascination as two interpretations emerged and diverged in an effort to discover the truth about the great Communist experiment in the Soviet Union. There has been agreement on such issues as the failure to alter human nature and to direct a monolithic world conspiracy from the Kremlin. What has divided the interpretations has been the question of the meaning of the course of events as they have proceeded since 1917. One "team" of historians has been united by the idea that Soviet history has been a militant variation on the great theme of modernization. Another has seen it as the disastrous consequence of modern ideology. The "A Team," clearly the sentimental favorite of academia, featured powerful scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Moshe Lewin, J. Arch Getty, and Jerry Hough, all masters of social science wizardry. Under their skilled hands what common sense had seen as a cautionary tale of ideological folly and sinister pathology was transmogrified into the story of a painful but necessary march into the modern age of urbanization, industrialization, and equality. Boiled down, the A Team arguments came to this: the Soviet people had been through hell all right, but at least it had been progressive hell, and by the 1980s the country exhibited most of the primary indices of a modernized society.

While grateful for the data generated by social science methodology, the "B Team," remained faithful to the traditional analytic and narrative discipline. Richard Pipes mind, but more than Richard Pipes on many points, historians have seen the Soviets in the context of history and history has presumably guided uniquely Western history is the thesis and misrouted from ideology like agent stacks, speciously the greatest mistakes of Communist experiment political, and so on is a deformity of the West.

Although the author have had the chance to see what Central...