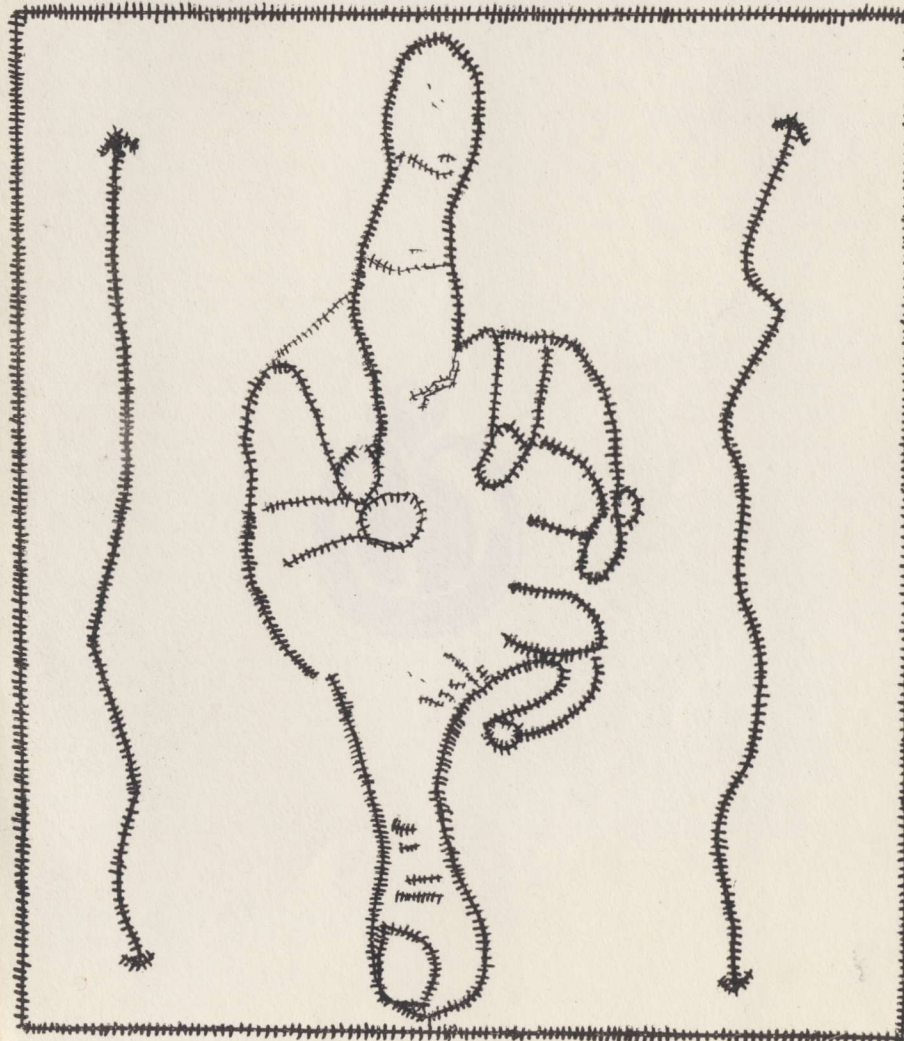


**THE
POWER TO
DESTROY**



**THE
POWER TO
CREATE**

A STATEMENT OF VIEWS BY ECOLOGY ACTION EAST



THE
POWER TO
CREATE

THE
POWER TO
DESTROY

A STATEMENT OF VIEWS BY ECOLOGY ACTION EAST



The power of this society to destroy has reached a scale unprecedented in the history of humanity -- and this power is being used, almost systematically, to work an insensate havoc upon the entire world of life and its material bases.

In nearly every region, air is being befouled, waterways polluted, soil washed away, the land dessicated, and wildlife destroyed. Coastal areas and even the depths of the sea are not immune to widespread pollution. More significantly in the long run, basic biological cycles such as the carbon cycle and nitrogen cycle, upon which all living things (including humans) depend for the maintenance and renewal of life, are being distorted to the point of irreversible damage. The wanton introduction of radioactive wastes, long-lived pesticides, lead residues, and thousands of toxic or potentially toxic chemicals in food, water, and air; the expansion of cities into vast urban belts, with dense concentrations of populations comparable in size to entire nations; the rising din of background noise; the stresses created by congestion, mass living, and mass manipulation; the immense accumulations of garbage, refuse, sewage, and industrial wastes; the congestion of highways and city streets with vehicular traffic; the profligate destruction of precious raw materials; the scarring of the earth by real estate speculators, mining and lumbering barons, and highway construction bureaucrats -- all, have wreaked a damage in a single generation that exceeds the damage inflicted by thousands of years of human habitation on this planet. If this tempo of destruction is borne in mind, it is terrifying to speculate about what lies ahead in the generation to come.

The essence of the ecological crisis in our time is that this society -- more than any other in the past -- is literally undoing the work of organic evolution. It is a truism to say that humanity is part of the fabric of life. It is perhaps more important at this late stage to emphasize that humanity depends critically upon the complexity and variety of life, that human well-being and survival rest upon a long evolution of organisms into increasingly complex and interdependent forms. The development of life into a complex web, the elaboration of primal animals and plants into highly varied forms, has been the precondition for the evolution and survival of humanity and nature.

Technology and Population

If the past generation has witnessed a despoilation of the planet that exceeds all the damage inflicted by earlier generations, little more than a generation may remain before the destruction of the environment becomes irreversible. For this reason, we must look at the roots of the ecological crisis with ruthless honesty. Time is running out and the remaining decades of the twentieth century may well be the last opportunity we will have to restore the balance between humanity and nature.

Do the roots of the ecological crisis lie in the development of technology? Technology has become a convenient target for bypassing the deep-seated social conditions that make machines and technical processes harmful.

How convenient it is to forget that technology has served not only to subvert the environment but also to improve it. The Neolithic Revolution which produced the most harmonious period between nature and post-paleolithic humanity was above all a technological revolution. It was this period that brought to humanity the arts of agriculture, weaving, pottery, the domestication of animals, the discovery of the wheel, and many other key advances. True there are techniques and technological attitudes that are entirely destructive of the balance between humanity and nature. Our responsibilities are to separate the promise of technology--its creative potential--

From the capacity of technology to destroy. Indeed, there is no such word as "Technology" that presides over all social conditions and relations; there are different technologies and attitudes toward technology, some of which are indispensable to restoring the balance, others of which have contributed profoundly to its destruction. What humanity needs is not a wholesale discarding of advanced technologies, but a sifting, indeed a further development of technology along ecological principles that will contribute to a new harmonization of society and the natural world.

Do the roots of the ecological crisis lie in population growth? This thesis is the most disquieting, and in many ways the most sinister, to be advanced by ecology action movements in the United States. Here, an effect called "population growth," juggled around on the basis of superficial statistics and projections, is turned into a cause. A problem of secondary proportions at the present time is given primacy, thus obscuring the fundamental reasons for the ecological crisis. True, if present economic, political & social conditions prevail, humanity will in time overpopulate the planet and by sheer weight of numbers turn into a pest in its own global habitat. There is something obscene, however, about the fact that an effect, "population growth," is being given primacy in the ecological crisis by a nation which has little more than seven percent of the world's population, wastefully devours more than fifty percent of the world's resources, and is currently engaged in the depopulation of an Oriental people that has lived for centuries in sensitive balance with its environment.

We must pause to look more carefully into the population problem, touted so widely by the white races of North America and Europe -- races that have wantonly exploited the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the South Pacific. The exploited have delicately advised their exploiters that, what they need are not contraceptive devices, armed "liberators," and Prof. Paul R. Ehrlich to resolve their population problems; rather, what they need is a fair return on the immense resources that were plundered from their lands by North America and Europe. To balance these accounts is more of a pressing need at the present time than to balance birth rates and death rates. The peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the South Pacific can justly point out that their American "advisors" have shown the world how to despoil a virgin continent in less than a century and have added the words "built-in obsolescence" to the vocabulary of humanity.

This much is clear: when large labour reserves were needed during the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century to man factories and depress wages, population growth was greeted enthusiastically by the new industrial bourgeoisie. And the growth of population occurred despite the fact that, owing to long working hours and grossly overcrowded cities, tuberculosis, cholera, and other diseases were pandemic in Europe and the United States. If birth rates exceeded death rates at this time, it was not because advances in medical care and sanitation had produced any dramatic decline in human mortality; rather, the excess of birth rates over death rates can be explained by the destruction of pre-industrial family forms, village institutions, mutual aid, and stable, traditional patterns of life at the hands of capitalist "enterprise." The decline in social morale ushered in by the horrors of the factory system, the degradation of traditional agrarian peoples into grossly exploited proletarians and urban dwellers, produced a concomitantly irresponsible attitude toward the family and the begetting of children. Sexuality became a refuge from a life of toil on the same order as the consumption of cheap gin; the new proletariat reproduced children, many of whom were never destined to survive into adulthood, as mindlessly as it drifted into alcoholism. Much the same process occurred when the villages of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were sacrificed on the holy altar of imperialism.

Today, the bourgeoisie "sees" things differently. The roseate years of "free enterprise" and "free labour" are waning before an era of monopoly, cartels, state-controlled economies, institutionalized forms of labour mobilization (trade unions), and automatic or cybernetic machinery. Large reserves of unemployed labour are no longer needed to meet the needs of capital expansion, and wages are largely negotiated rather than left to the free play of the labour market. From a need, idle labour reserves have now turned into a threat to the stability of a managed bourgeois economy. The logic of this new "perspective" found its most terrifying expression in German fascism. To the Nazis, Europe was already "overpopulated" in the thirties and the "population problem" was "solved" in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The same logic is implicit in many of the neo-Malthusian arguments that masquerade as ecology today. Let there be no mistake about this conclusion.

Sooner or later the mindless proliferation of human beings will have to be arrested, but population control will either be initiated by "social controls" (authoritarian or racist methods and eventually be systematic genocide) or by a libertarian, ecologically oriented society (a society that develops a new balance with nature out of a reverence for life). Modern society stands before these mutually exclusive alternatives and a choice must be made without dissimulation. Ecology action is fundamentally social action. Either we will go directly to the social roots of the ecological crisis or we will be deceived into an era of totalitarianism.

Ecology and Society

The basic conception that humanity must dominate and exploit nature stems from the domination and exploitation of man by man. Indeed, this conception goes back earlier to a time when men began to dominate and exploit women in the patriarchal family. From that point onward, human beings were increasingly regarded as mere resources, as objects instead of subjects. The hierarchies, classes, propertied forms, and statist institutions that emerged with social domination were carried over conceptually into humanity's relationship with nature. Nature too became increasingly regarded as a mere resource, an object, a raw material to be exploited as ruthlessly as slaves on a latifundium. This "worldview" permeated not only the official culture of hierarchical society; it became the way in which slaves, serfs, industrial workers and women of all social classes began to view themselves. As embodied in the "work ethic," in a morality based on denial and renunciation, in a mode of behavior based on the sublimation of erotic desires, and in otherworldly outlooks (be they European or Asian), the slaves, serfs, workers, and female half of humanity were taught to police themselves, to fashion their own chains, to close the doors on their own prison cells.

If the "worldview" of hierarchical society is beginning to wane today, this is mainly because the enormous productivity of modern technology has opened a new vision: the possibility of material abundance, an end to scarcity, and an era of free time (so-called "leisure time") with minimal toil.

Our society is becoming permeated by a tension between "what-is" and "what-could-be," a tension exacerbated by the irrational, inhuman exploitation and destruction of the earth and its inhabitants. The greatest impediment that obstructs a resolution of this tension is the extent to which hierarchical society still fashions our outlook and actions. It is easier to take refuge in critiques of technology and population growth; to deal with an archaic, destructive social system on its own terms and within its own framework. Almost from birth, we have been socialized by the family, religious institutions, schools, and by the work process itself into accepting hierarchy, renunciation, and statist systems as the premises on which all thinking must rest. Without shedding these premises, all discussions of ecological balance must remain palliative and self-defeating.

By virtue of its unique cultural baggage, modern society--our profit-oriented bourgeois society -- tends to exacerbate humanity's conflict with nature in a more critical fashion than pre-industrial societies of the past. In bourgeois society, humans are not only turned into objects; they are turned into commodities; into objects explicitly designed for sale on the market place. Competition between human beings, qua commodities, becomes an end in itself, together with the production of utterly useless goods. Quality is turned into quantity, individual culture into mass culture, personal communication into mass communication. The natural environment is turned into a gigantic factory, the city into an immense market place; everything from a Redwood forest to a woman's body has "a price." Everything is equatable in dollars-and-cents, be it a hallowed cathedral or individual honour. Technology ceases to be an extension of humanity; humanity becomes an extension of technology. The machine does not expand the power of the worker; the worker expands the power of the machine, indeed, he becomes a mere part of the machine.

Is it surprising, then, that this exploitative, degrading, quantified society pits humanity against itself and against nature on a more awesome scale than any other in the past?

Yes, we need change, but change so fundamental and far-reaching that even the concept of revolution and freedom must be expanded beyond all earlier horizons. No longer is it enough to speak of new techniques for conserving and fostering

the natural environment; we must deal with the earth communally, as a human collectivity, without those trammels of private property that have distorted humanity's vision of life and nature since the break-up of tribal society. We must eliminate not only bourgeois hierarchy, but hierarchy as such; not only the patriarchal family, but all modes of sexual and parental domination; not only the bourgeois class and propertied system, but all social classes and property. Humanity must come into possession of itself, individually and collectively, so that all human beings attain control of their everyday lives. Our cities must be decentralized into communities, or ecocommunities, exquisitely and artfully tailored to the carrying capacity of the ecosystems in which they are located. Our technologies must be readapted and advanced into ecotechnologies, exquisitely and artfully adapted to make use of local energy sources and materials, with minimal or no pollution of the environment. We must recover a new sense of our needs -- needs that foster a healthful life and express our individual proclivities, not "needs" dictated by the mass media. We must restore the human scale in our environment and in our social relations, replacing mediated by direct personal relations in the management of society. Finally, all modes of domination -- social or personal -- must be banished from our conceptions of ourselves, our fellow humans, and nature. The administration of humans must be replaced by the administration of things. The revolution we seek must encompass not only political institutions and economic relations, but consciousness, life style, erotic desires, and our interpretation of the meaning of life.

What is in the balance, here, is the age-long spirit and systems of domination and repression that have not only pitted human against human, but humanity against nature. The conflict between humanity and nature is an extension of the conflict between human and human. Unless the ecology movement encompasses the problem of domination in all its aspects, it will contribute nothing toward eliminating the root causes of the ecological crisis of our time. If the ecology movement stops at mere reforms in pollution and conservation control without dealing radically with the need for an expanded concept of revolution it will merely serve as a safety valve for the existing system of natural and human exploitation.

Goals

In some respects the ecology movement today is waging a delaying action against the rampant destruction of the environment. In other respects its most conscious elements are involved in a creative movement to totally revolutionize the social relations of humans to each other and of humanity to nature.

Although they closely interpenetrate, the two efforts should be distinguished from each other. Ecology Action East supports every effort to conserve the environment: to preserve clean air and water, to limit the use of pesticides and food additives, to reduce vehicular traffic in streets and on highways, to make cities more wholesome physically, to prevent radioactive wastes from seeping into the environment, to guard and expand wilderness areas and domains for wildlife, to defend animal species from human depredation.

But Ecology Action East does not deceive itself that such delaying actions constitute a solution to the fundamental conflict that exists between the present social order and the natural world. Nor can such delaying actions arrest the overwhelming momentum of the existing society for destruction.

This social order plays games with us. It grants long-delayed, piecemeal and woefully inadequate reforms to deflect our energies and attention from larger acts of destruction. In a sense, we are "offered" a patch of Redwood forest in exchange for the Cascades. Viewed in a larger perspective, this attempt to reduce ecology to a barter relationship does not rescue anything; it is a cheap modus operandi for trading away the greater part of the planet for a few islands of wilderness, for pocket parks in a devastated world of concrete.

Ecology Action East has two primary aims: one is to increase in the revolutionary movement the awareness that the most destructive and pressing consequences of our alienating, exploitative society is the environmental crisis, and that any truly revolutionary society must be built upon ecological precepts; the other is to create, in the minds of the millions of Americans who are concerned with the destruction of our environment, the consciousness that the principles of ecology, carried to their logical end, demand radical changes in our society and our way of looking at the world.

Ecology Action East takes its stand with the life-style revolution that, at its best, seeks an expanded consciousness of experience and human freedom. We seek the liberation of women, of children, of gay people, of black people and colonial peoples, and of working people in all occupations as part of a growing social struggle against the age-old traditions and institutions of domination -- traditions and institutions that have so destructively shaped humanity's attitude toward the natural world. We support libertarian communities and struggles for freedom wherever they arise; we take our stand with every effort to promote the spontaneous self-development of the young; we oppose every attempt to repress human sexuality, to deny humanity the eroticization of experience in all its forms. We join in all endeavors to foster a joyous artfulness in life and work: the promotion of crafts and quality production, the design of new ecocommunities and ecotechnologies, the right to experience on a daily basis the beauty of the natural world, the open, unmediated, sensuous pleasure that humans can give to each other, the growing reverence for the world of life.

In short, we hope for a revolution which will produce politically independent communities whose boundaries and populations will be defined by a new ecological consciousness; communities whose inhabitants will determine for themselves within the framework of this new consciousness the nature and level of their technologies, the forms taken by their social structures, world views, life styles, expressive arts, and all the other aspects of their daily lives.

But we do not delude ourselves that this life-oriented world can be fully developed or even partially achieved in a death-oriented society. American society, as it is constituted today, is riddled with racism and sits astride the entire world, not only as a consumer of its wealth and resources, but as an obstacle to all attempts at self-determination at home and abroad. Its inherent aims are production for the sake of production, the preservation of hierarchy and toil on a world scale, mass manipulation and control by centralized, statist institutions. This kind of society is unalterably counterposed to a life-oriented world. If the ecology movement does not direct its main efforts toward a revolution in all areas of life -- social as well as natural, political as well as personal, economic as well as cultural -- then the movement will gradually become a safety valve of the established order.

It is our hope that groups like our own will spring up throughout the country, organized like ourselves on a humanistic, libertarian basis, engaged in mutual action and a spirit of cooperation based on mutual aid. It is our hope that they will try to foster a new ecological attitude not only toward nature but also toward humans: a conception of spontaneous, variegated relations within groups and between groups, within society and between individuals.

We hope that ecology groups will eschew all appeals to the "heads of government" and to international or national state institutions, the very criminals and political bodies that have materially contributed to the ecological crisis of our time. We believe the appeals must be made to the people and to their capacity for direct action that can get them to take control of their own lives and destinies. For only in this way can a society emerge without hierarchy and domination, a society in which each individual is the master of his or her own fate.

The great splits which divided human from human, humanity from nature, individual from society, town from country, mental from physical activity, reason from emotion, and generation from generation must now be transcended. The fulfillment of the age-old quest for survival and material security in a world of scarcity was once regarded as the precondition for freedom and a fully human life. To live we had to survive. As Brecht put it: "First feed the face, then give the moral."

The situation has now begun to change. The ecological crisis of our time has increasingly reversed this traditional maxim. Today, if we are to survive, we must begin to live. Our solutions must be commensurable with the scope of the problem, or else nature will take a terrifying revenge on humanity.

Ecology Action East

December, 1969

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