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Brass-Tacks Ecology

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It is not merely a question of water supply and drains now, you know. No - it is the whole of our social life that we have got to purify and disinfect. Henrik Ibsen¹

When solutions to the problems of human ecology are considered, all roads seem to lead to the political arena. Paul Ehrlich et al.²

[Environmentalists] should lobby as hard for campaign reform as they do for environmental issues. Since the movement will never be able to match industry's war chests, the only way to level the playing field is . . . through campaign finance reform. Randy Hayes³

Between 1970 and 1990, the United States passed laws, created agencies, and spent one trillion dollars in an ostensible effort to improve environmental quality. Yet, despite some notable gains (e.g., less lead in children's brains), and despite the strenuous efforts of grass-roots and national organizations, "the massive national effort to restore the quality of the environment has failed."⁴

Among the many reasons for this failure, two need to be touched upon here. First, the great majority of environmental thinkers ignore concrete political realities. Instead, they are caught up in debates about the significance of one or another proximate cause of the environmental crisis (choice of production technologies and materials, overpopulation, and affluence), or of one or another alleged ultimate cause (philosophical beliefs and practices; biological heritage; our tendency to dominate and exploit the poor, racial minorities, and women). The environmental movement is thus bereft of a core practical philosophy capable of guiding and sustaining its actions.⁵

Second, while most environmental writers ignore brass-tacks political realities, environmental activists often misconstrue them:

Although people who see the answer in political activism may be noble champions of the democratic ideal, they do not seem to appreciate what they are up against. Special interests are bound to be victorious over the common interest in the long run. The prospect of the ecological interest somehow prevailing over the commercial, financial, and manufacturing interests whose money pays the media pipers and finances the electoral process is therefore remote, to say the least. . . . Environmental politicking within the system can

only be a rear-guard holding action designed to slow the pace of ecological retreat.⁶

This essay documents the built-in anti-ecological bias of American policies, traces this bias to one of its roots, and argues that environmentalists should direct their attention to the extirpation of this single root, not - as they do now - to the inherently futile struggle against its numberless surface manifestations.

The Misbehavior of Organizations

We may begin with a simple extrapolation of the Lloyd/Hardin⁷ "tragedy of the commons" metaphor: When forced to choose between a course of action which benefits their short-term interests but harms society, and a course of action which benefits society but harms their short-term interests, and when free to make this choice on their own, organizations tend to choose actions that benefit them and harm society.⁸ When such harmful actions come under attack, organizations tend to defend them, "as if endowed with the instincts of living beings."⁹ On this view, a civilization can be judged, in part, by its record of taming organizational misbehavior.

The nature and consequences of organizational misbehavior can be best grasped through a few, randomly chosen, case histories and reflections:

I.In 1906, more than 10 percent of milk samples in New York City contained live tuberculosis-causing bacteria. Though it was well known by then that these bacteria could be killed by pasteurization (heating the milk), the dairy industry's spokesmen and scientists put up the usual fight. Among other things, they claimed that pasteurization would destroy the value of milk and price it off the market. Blessedly (albeit too late for the many additional victims), they and the pathogens lost the fight.¹⁰

II.By the early 1930s, at the latest, the Manville Corporation (the world's largest asbestos manufacturer) knew that prolonged exposure to asbestos was potentially lethal, but withheld that information from the government, the public, and its own workers. Manville challenged unfavorable research findings by sponsoring more congenial, albeit less objective, "research." It dismissed troublesome British findings by disingenuously alleging that they did not apply to the United States and by giving them the silent treatment in the industry's trade journal. With straight faces, Manville's scientists and lawyers argued for years and years that the problem was not with asbestos, but with the "individual susceptibilities" of asbestos workers.¹¹

After the publication of the 1955 study establishing a link between asbestos and lung cancer, the industry took the offensive, hiring nu-

merous researches to "prove" that asbestos was harmless. By 1960, sixty-three scientific papers had been published on the problems of asbestos exposure. The eleven studies funded by the asbestos industry all rejected the connection between asbestos and lung cancer and minimized the dangers of asbestosis. All fifty-two independent studies, on the other hand, found asbestos to pose a major threat to human health. Such evidence suggests that the asbestos industry knowingly perpetrated a massive fraud on its workers and on the public.¹²

In the United States alone, asbestos-related diseases may claim the lives of 2.5 million exposed to asbestos dust on the job.¹³ Yet, even now, the governments of Canada and Quebec continue to lobby abroad for the unimpeded exports of Canadian asbestos.¹⁴

III.As in any other struggle to clean up the environment, the attitudes of the various corporations to non-leaded petrol differed according to how they felt it would affect their products, rather than on the intrinsic merits of the case.¹⁵

IV.In 1970, the Ford Motor Company introduced the Pinto — a small car intended to compete with popular foreign imports. Ford did so even though secret pre-production crash tests unequivocally showed that rear-end collisions would readily rupture the Pinto's gas tank and turn the Pinto into a firetrap. "For more than eight years afterwards, Ford successfully lobbied, with extraordinary vigor and some blatant lies, against a key government safety standard that would have forced the company to change the Pinto's fire-prone gas tank."¹⁶ During that period, some 700 people died and thousands more were disfigured.

Ford's conduct had nothing to do with public-spiritedness and everything's to do with short-term interest: The cost of retooling Pinto assembly lines and of equipping each car with a \$5.08 safety gadget, company accountants calculated, was greater than paying out millions to victims and their families. "The bottom line ruled, and inflammable Pintos kept rolling out of the factories."¹⁷ In 1978 a judge presiding over a Pinto-related tragedy concluded that "Ford's institutional mentality was shown to be one of callous indifference to public safety."¹⁸

V. In 1989, the late militant environmentalist Judi Bari, a friend, and their children were run off the road by a log truck they had blockaded the day before. The FBI was uninterested in pressing charges against their assailant. But when, in 1990, a bomb exploded under the seat of Judi's car, shattering her pelvis, dislocating her spine, and injuring fellow activist and co-passenger Daryl Cherney, the FBI was unremittingly interested — in filing charges against the *victims* and in risking Judi's life by moving her from the hospital's intensive care unit to its jail ward. A private investigator working on the case concluded that the bomber remained at large because the FBI tried "to nail Judi and Daryl" instead of following real leads.²⁰

VI. Here is a 1981 summary of the smoking/cancer "controversy" by a respected British cancer researcher:

There can never be, really, clearer proof than we now have with tobacco. Yet the industry concerned will not accept in public that it is causing these deaths. I think that this will be true of many other industries which are found to cause deaths. . . . when an industry is found to cause substantial numbers of deaths, with a few exceptions . . . there will be deliberate attempts to mislead government and the public as to what the evidence is. Even if certain individuals in such industries want to be humane and want to work in some kind of way towards the general good, and they are effective at doing so, then they will find themselves rendered impotent or fired, because it is not in the commercial interests of an industry to have its products advertised as causing this, that, and the other kind of disease.²¹

VII.A former Deputy Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency:

Left alone, our government will not always look after the public interest. In the environmental area there is a natural, built-in imbalance. Private industry, driven by its own profit incentives to exploit and pollute our natural resources, uses its inherent advantages to exert political pressure to resist environmental requirements. The machinations of industry explain at least in part why the abuses of pollution became so severe before steps were taken to establish controls. It was not until conditions approached a point of horror that the public woke up to the need for reform.²²

VIII.

When I was California's secretary for resources . . . I called my first hearing, on a toxic agricultural chemical. I called the hearing because the scientists in the resources agency brought in research from universities and elsewhere confirming our suspicions that this substance was detrimental to health when applied to food products. The chemical companies that produced the chemical brought their own scientists to the hearing, who began pecking away at our data, focusing on minutiae and quibbling over irrelevant details. In the end, even though we were certain of our data, they raised enough doubt that the legislative committee would not make the recommended changes. This is standard practice in the United States. Nearly every decision we made in the resources agency resulted in a lawsuit, based on "scientific" challenges to our information.²³

IX. The first clarion calls about Earth's ozone layer were sounded in 1974. By the mid-1980s, recurring 50 percent seasonal depletions over Antarctica were reported. Though the causes of these depletions were uncertain, the chief suspects were CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons), a group of human made chemicals. Moreover, these same CFCs also accounted for some 24

that there was no reason for synthesizing any of these chemicals, because *nearly everything done by the CFCs and their [harmful] suggested synthetic replacements can be done very nearly as effectively by naturally occurring substances that do no ozone damage at all* - by water, for instance, or by such inert gases (in such applications as refrigeration and air-conditioning) as helium or carbon dioxide. What they also knew, though, was that . . . the trouble with replacing CFCs with, say, water - from the point of view of the chemical industry - is that they can't sell water; and their voices in the ears of government were far louder than those of the environmentalists.²⁵

X. It's important to note that organizational misconduct pervades every aspect of politics, not just environmental politics. Here we only cite two instances:

The M-16 rifle had been a brilliant technical success in its early models, but was perverted by bureaucratic pressures into a weapon that betrayed its users in Vietnam. . . . Between 1965 and 1969, more than one million American soldiers served in combat in Vietnam. . . . During those years, in which more than 40,000 American soldiers were killed by hostile fire and more than 250,000 wounded, American troops in Vietnam were equipped with a rifle their superiors *knew* would fail when put to the test. . . . The original version of the M-16 . . . was the most reliable, and the most lethal, infantry rifle ever invented. But within months of its introduction in combat, it was known among soldiers as a weapon that might jam and misfire, and could pose as great a danger to them as to their enemy. These problems, which loomed so large on the battlefield, were entirely the results of modifications made to the rifle's original design by the Army's own ordnance bureaucracy. The Army's modifications had very little to do with observation of warfare, but quite a lot to do with settling organizational scores.²⁶

Through seven years of fruitless toil to reach a bipartisan agreement on campaign finance reform, one lesson was taught over and over and over: Everyone protects

his or her own interest. PAC managers espouse the virtues of collective, disclosed giving as a sign of healthy political involvement. Party officials, despite verbiage to the contrary, prefer the status quo of evading the spirit or letter of the law. Elected officials individually work to produce 535 potential reform bills that will ensure collective stalemate.²⁷

XI. Although this essay focuses on American politics, the tension between organizational interests and the common good have existed everywhere and always. A former high-ranking Yugoslav official explained past collectivizations of peasant holdings in communist countries:

The fact that the seizure of property from other classes, especially from small owners, led to decreases in production and to chaos in the economy was of no consequence to the new class [Communist Party]. . . . The class profited from the new property it had acquired even though the nation lost thereby.²⁸

XII.

What does the Dalkon Shield catastrophe teach us? Not that the A. H. Robins Company was a renegade in the pharmaceutical industry. Yes, Robins - knowingly and willfully - put corporate greed before human welfare, suppressed scientific studies that would ascertain safety and effectiveness, concealed hazards from consumers, the medical profession, and government, assigned a lower value to foreign lives than to American lives, behaved ruthlessly towards victims who sued, and hired outside experts who would give accommodating testimony. Yet almost every other major drug company has done one or more of these things, and some have done them repeatedly or routinely, and continue to do so. Some have even been criminally persecuted and convicted, and are recidivists. Nor does the Shield catastrophe teach us that the pharmaceutical industry is unique. Cigarette companies profit from smoking, the single greatest cause of preventable disease and death. Knowingly and willfully, automobile manufacturers have sold cars that would become rolling incinerators in rear-end collisions; chemical companies have sold abroad carcinogenic pesticides that are banned here; makers of infant formula have, in impoverished Third World countries, deprived babies of breast milk, the nearly perfect food; assorted industries have dumped poisonous wastes in the environment; coal companies have falsified records showing the exposure of miners to the particles that cause Black Lung; military contractors have supplied defective weapons to the armed services.²⁹

Our random sampler of case histories and reflections documents the ubiquity and

decisive importance of organizational misconduct. It supports the conception "of a large organization as a real acting unit because the people within it can be replaced, and because the positions they occupy constrain their thoughts and actions."³⁰ It shows that corporate misconduct follows a pattern.³¹ It supports the claim of asymmetry in American society between faceless organizations and individuals. We have here a situation in which "two parties beginning with nominally equal rights in a relation, but coming to it with vastly different resources, end with very different actual rights in the relation."³² This sampler suggests that organizational malfeasance pays. Because punishment of organizational misconduct is relatively rare, and because the financial penalties that are levied often fail to equal "the gains from corporate violations of the law," corporations "can usually treat both criminal penalties and civil fines as merely a cost of doing business."³³ This and similar samplers tell us much about life in these United States:

The repeated examples of respected men and women using the most unscrupulous means to enlarge already ample fortunes, of major corporations' indifference to the injuries and deaths they cause innocent people, of the government's violations of human rights, and of the weakness and corruption of the enforcement effort, certainly cast our society in a dark light.³⁴

The implications of organizational misconduct to the future of humanity are profound. True, such misconduct exerted decisive influence over human affairs long before 1997. It is also true that human beings have been annihilating species and degrading ecosystems for millennia.³⁵ But even if we put ethics aside, past wrongs do not, by any stretch of the imagination, justify complacency: our ancestors could plead ignorance and comparative inconsequentiality; we can't.

These case studies and reflections tell us why the human predicament "is much more serious" in 1997 than it was in 1970.³⁶ They tell us why we persist in doing too little too late when it comes to pollution, overpopulation, and conspicuous consumption.

For committed democrats,³⁷ these examples raise a grave question: *How do organizations manage to convince us that their interests should override ours, our descendants', and nature's?* The answer no doubt has something to do with our worldview,³⁸ social realities, our nature,³⁹ our sources of information,⁴⁰ and the character of our elections.⁴¹ For practical reasons, though, here I shall only touch upon the frailest - and perhaps most important - root of environmental neglect.

Money and Environmental Politics

The intimate link between private money and national policies is well-known. "To get elected these days, what matters most is not sound judgment or personal integrity or a passion for justice. What matters most is money. Lots of money."42 This observation is backed up by a considerable amount of research. For instance, in one study money emerged "as the first and most essential element in political party activity and effectiveness in the 1980s."43 Another study shows that "campaign spending has a significant effect on the outcomes of congressional elections."44

Common sense suggests that political donations are worthwhile investments. Indeed, studies show a "disturbing correlation between . . . campaign contributions and how members of Congress . . . vote on bills important to special interest groups."45 A former counsel for President Carter says: "It's one step away from bribery. PACs contribute because they count on you to vote with them."46

Apart from "the exceptionally wealthy," says chief Washington correspondent of a major daily, "raising political money has become a throbbing headache that drains vital time and energy from the job of governing. This chore leaves many members part-time legislators and full-time fund-raisers."47 Naturally, organizations which benefit from environmental neglect enrich the campaign coffers of politicians who are willing to tolerate it. One member of Congress quipped once that "business already owns one party and now it has a lease, with option to buy, on the other."48

Over the years we have gotten used to occasional outbursts on this issue, not only from reformers but from frustrated or about-to-be-retired members of the power elite. Two "old-line conservatives" who, by 1986, "have been senators a combined total of 68 years:" "It is not 'we the people' but political-action committees and moneyed interests who are setting the nation's political agenda and are influencing the position of candidates on the important issues of the day," said one senator. "We are gradually moving elections away from the people," said the other, "as certainly as night follows day."49

The "terrible pressures" a politician faces in our system, said a John F. Kennedy's ghostwriter, "discourage acts of political courage" and often drive him to "abandon or subdue his conscience."50 "Searching for campaign money," said a former U.S. Vice President, "is a disgusting, degrading, demeaning experience. It is about time we cleaned it up."51 A U.S. Senator: "When *special* interests control the financing for campaigns, Congress is very unlikely to act in the *national* interest."52 "Everybody knows the problems of campaign money today," says President Clinton, "there's too much of it, it takes too much time to raise, and it raises too many questions."53 In 1987, a Senate majority leader appealed to his colleagues:

It is my strong belief that the great majority of senators - of both parties - know that the current system of campaign financing is damaging the Senate, hurts their ability to be the best senator for this nation and for citizens of their respective States that they could be, strains their family life by consuming even more time than their official responsibilities demand, and destroys the democracy we all cherish by eroding public confidence in its integrity. If we do not face a problem of this magnitude and fix it, we have no one but ourselves to blame for the tragic results.⁵⁴

A mainstream journalist commented on a political scandal, a scandal which led to an open hearing in the U.S. Senate. In this hearing,

The slimy underbelly of American politics slithered into full view, [exposing] how U.S. senators grub for campaign funds from moneyed interests seeking to buy influence. . . . It was the best lesson the nation has yet had on the costs and the consequences of a campaign-finance system that has corroded government at the highest levels. Even if all five senators are cleared in the end, this trial-like procedure is likely to evoke a public verdict that the system itself is guilty of murder, with integrity the casualty. . . . [This scandal] is not different in kind from the defense industry interests that lavish money on members of the armed services committees, the union political action groups that funnel cash to the labor committee lawmaker, or the Wall Street interest that fuel the campaigns of incumbents who oversee securities-industry lawmaking. They are all threads in the dark tapestry that now smothers our political system, like a smelly blanket under which lawmakers lie in bed with those who would procure their favors for cash. There is a name for those who solicit such attention, and it is not "senator."⁵⁵

Six years later, another mainstream journalist wrote:

The government is being bought out from underneath us through legal bribes called campaign contributions. The scandal of politics is not what's illegal - it's what is legal.⁵⁶

The sober reflections of two political scientists:

[The] political finance system . . . undermines the ideals and hampers the performance of American democracy. . . . Officials . . . are . . . captives of the present system. Their integrity and judgment are menaced — and too often compromised - by the need to raise

money and the means now available for doing it. . . . The pattern of giving distorts American elections: candidates win access to the electorate only if they can mobilize money from the upper classes, established interest groups, big givers, or ideological zealots. Other alternatives have difficulty getting heard. And the voters' choice is thereby limited. The pattern of giving also threatens the governmental process: the contributions of big givers and interest groups award them access to officeholders, so they can better plead their causes. . . . The private financing system . . . distort[s] both elections and decision making. The equality of citizens on election day is diluted by their inequality in campaign financing. The electorate shares its control of officials with the financial constituency.⁵⁷

Money, then, throws some light on our collective misbehavior. In particular, it explains in part why the early promise of environmental cleanup remains unfulfilled:

No matter how large, clever, and sophisticated in the ways of Washington the environmental movement has become, when it comes to lobbying congress, it has remained a mosquito on the hindquarters of the industrial elephant. Corporations finance a lobby that is willing to spend almost unlimited time and money combating a process - environmental regulation - they claim costs them \$125 billion a year. Chemical manufacturers, oil companies, big agriculture, timber interests, and their PACs will, unless campaign finance laws are reformed, always have greater access to the legislature than environmental lobbyists. . . . Studies of lobbies and PAC contributions indicate that industry is pretty much willing to match the environmental movement about 10 to 1 in dollars and lobbyists. In the 1991-1992 congressional session, the Sierra Club contributed \$680,000 to congressional candidates nationwide, an enormous amount for an environmental organization. The amount was dwarfed, however, by the \$21.3 million donated during the same session by the energy and resource-extraction industries alone.⁵⁸

Concluding Remarks

Contemporary thinkers help us understand the environmental situation and visualize sustainable futures. Yet, if they wish to see anything like their beautiful dreams come true, they must solidly embed ugly political facts in their critiques of contemporary America.

Similarly, the strategy of fighting directly against the environmental ill one cares most about - despite its intuitive appeal, sporadic victories, and millions

of well-meaning and dedicated practitioners - is counterproductive. In a political system that institutionalizes bribes, the struggles of grass-roots and mainstream environmentalists resemble wrestling matches in which one fighter must tie both hands behind her back. Environmentalists should focus their scarce energies and resources on, once and for all, untying one of their hands. Along with other humanitarians, they must launch an all-out campaign whose single goal is this: *eradicating* the scourge of private money from American politics.

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