II

In the modern marketplace of ideas, environmentalism occupies the broad space between two sharply opposed views of the human predicament: the buoyantly optimistic vision of the economist and the profoundly pessimistic vision of the biologist. The neoclassical economist's mystical belief in the magic of the market as an instrument of human welfare contrasts with the population biologist's equally mystical belief in the human propensity for collective suicide through overbreeding. If the economist acknowledges no natural limits to growth, the biologist is obsessed only with such limits. What the two have in common is their skepticism of purposive action for the common good: in the one case it is not needed because of the mantra that the market takes care of all our problems; in the other case it is probably too late.

As compared to the dominant schools in economics and biology, environmentalists take a subtle view of the human prospect. They acknowledge that Spaceship Earth does set certain limits to economic expansion but argue that it is only at certain times and in certain places that environmental degradation is of sufficient magnitude to threaten the future of specific societies. However, like neoclassical economics and Malthusian biology, ecological consciousness must also be viewed as a distinctive response to the growth of industrial society. Here, I believe that, within the environmental movement, there are three generic responses to industrialization: the three environmental

philosophies of our time are *agrarianism*, *wilderness thinking*, and *scientific industrialism*.

At one level, of course, these are simply three perspectives on the human–nature relationship. Scientific industrialism and wilderness thinking are the two old antagonists parading under new names: one advocating the conquest of nature, the other pleading for human submission to natural processes. And agrarianism is nothing but the search for a golden mean of stewardship and sustainable use.[6] However, each of these perspectives on nature also forms part of a larger philosophy of social reconstruction. They each rest on a distinct theory of history which outlines where society is coming from, where it seems to be heading, and in what direction it should go. I term these philosophies "utopian" for in each case their critique of the existing social order has as its point of reference an ideal society free of the blemishes of the one being attacked.

For agrarianism, the apogee of human history is represented by the grain-based civilizations of Europe and Asia. The agrarian views with disfavor both tribal society—where life was believed to be nasty, brutish, and short—and industrial society, where humans have succumbed to the pursuit of wealth. The ecological and social ideal here is peasant society, where technology is on the human scale and the bonds of community strong. The political program of agrarianism is therefore to resist the onslaught of commercialism and industrialism where they have not yet made inroads; and where they have, to resolutely turn one's back on modern society and go "back to the land."

As a social response to industrialization, agrarianism has usually invoked the traditions of a culture staring defeat in the face. In *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, his great work on the making of the modern world, Barrington Moore, Jr rather cynically remarked that the peasant rebellions of early modern Europe represented the "dying wail of a class over whom the wave of progress is about to roll."[7] Memories of these peasant movements were, however, kept alive by a galaxy of poets and writers whose moral, and indeed ecological, indictment of industrial capitalism has been brilliantly analyzed in the English case by Raymond Williams.[8] But even as the industrial economy of the North has transformed itself into a post-industrial one, in other parts of the world agrarianism continues to exercise a compelling appeal.

Later I shall have more to say about the heritage of the best-known American agrarian, Thomas Jefferson, and that of the best-known Indian agrarian, Mahatma Gandhi. For a succinct statement of the agrarian ideal, however, we need to turn to Gandhi's close contemporary, the poet and novelist Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for literature. In an arresting analogy—albeit one which modern feminists may find patriarchally irksome—Tagore observes that

> Villages are like women. In their keeping is the cradle of the race. They are nearer to nature than towns, and in closer touch with the fountain of life. They possess a natural power of healing. It is the function of the village, like that of women, to provide people

with their elementary needs, with food and joy, with the simple poetry of life and with those ceremonies of beauty which the village spontaneously produces and in which she finds delight. But when constant strain is put upon her, when her resources are excessively exploited, she becomes dull and uncreative. From her time-honoured position of the wedded wife, she then descends to that of a maidservant. The city, in its intense egotism and pride, remains unconscious of the hurt it inflicts on the very source of its life, health and joy.

In medieval civilization—or what Tagore calls the "natural state"—the "village and the town have harmonious interactions. From the one, flow food and health and fellow being. From the other, return gifts of wealth, knowledge and energy." This balance is rudely shattered by the growth of industrialization. Now, "greed has struck at the relationship of mutuality between town and village." For, "modern cities feed upon the social organism that runs through the village. They appropriate the life stuff of the community and slough off a huge amount of dead matter, while making a lurid counterfeit of prosperity." Indeed, cities today "represent energy and materials concentrated for the satisfaction of that bloated appetite which is the characteristic symptom of modern civilization."[9]

We come next to wilderness thinking, the environmental philosophy so firmly planted in American soil. There is widespread agreement within the wilderness movement on the need to fully protect and if possible expand the system of national parks;

there is, however, no such consensus on a philosophy of social reconstruction based on the wilderness ethic. One school, among whose influential spokesmen is Roderick Nash, views nature appreciation as an indication of a culture's maturity. Here, wilderness is not counterposed to civilization but is in fact the surest indicator of the flowering of civilization. In this perspective automobiles and national parks, free-flowing rivers and power plants, universities and trails, can and must coexist.[10]

Of more interest to us is the radical strand in wilderness thinking, which we may call pre-agrarianism or, perhaps more accurately, *primitivism*. This believes that an original state of harmony with nature was rudely shattered by the white man. Here, BC may as well stand for "Before Columbus." The founder of the Wilderness Society, Robert Marshall, claimed that before Columbus the whole of North America was a wilderness where "over billions of acres the aboriginal wanderers still spun out their peripatetic careers, the wild animals still browsed in unmolested meadows and the forests still grew and moldered and grew again precisely as they had done for interminable centuries."[11] For the primitivist the victory of agriculture signals a precipitous fall in ecological wisdom. And, as the iron plow lacerates mother earth, human history spirals downward. Industrialism only further accentuates the separation of humans from nature, a partial brake on its excesses being provided, belatedly and ineffectively, by the movement to set aside areas of forest and wilderness as national parks.

The primitivist theory of history has inspired truly radical

proposals—for example, the reduction of human population by 90 percent to allow the recovery of wilderness areas and species threatened with extinction.[12] Pursuing the principle of "biocentric equality" which they hold dear, deep ecologists—perhaps constituting the leading edge of primitivism—turn their back on both agricultural and industrial society. Only hunting and gathering, they believe, can satisfy essential human needs without sacrificing the rights of non-human species. A return to pagan, pre-Christian origins is therefore a precondition for restoring harmony in nature. This return to origins would allow even white society to recover its humanity. To quote the Native American thinker Vine Deloria, Jr, "the white man must drop his dollar-chasing civilization and return to a simple, tribal, game-hunting, berry-hunting life if he is to survive. He must quickly adopt not only the contemporary [American] Indian worldview but the ancient Indian worldview to survive."[13]

The idea that hunter-gatherers were the first, and perhaps still the only *real*, environmentalists is pervasive among radical edges of the wilderness movement. It is upheld by many activists and implicitly present in the work of some scientists as well. Reviewing the biologist Jared Diamond's book *Collapse*, the Cambridge economist Partha Dasgupta sarcastically says: "reading Diamond you would think that our ancestors should all have remained hunter-gatherers in Africa, co-evolving with the native flora and fauna, and roaming the wilds in search of wild berries and the occasional piece of meat." The disdain is unmistakable, and redolent of the Oxbridge high table. But

the fact is that even if Diamond does not quite think that way, many of his fellow greens in California do believe that not just our ancestors but our descendants should live in this fashion.[14]

The primitivist theory of history is in essence a theory of *de-development* or *un-development*, a steady fall from the natural high of hunter-gatherer society. For, the first humans were literally reared in the womb of nature. Exposed from birth to the sights, smells, and sounds of the natural world, hunter-gatherers were at one with their surroundings, feeling themselves to be the "guests rather than masters" of nature. This unity was disrupted by civilization which, in the words of the California ecologist Paul Shepard, "increased the separation between the individual and the natural world as it did the child from the mother . . ." Significantly, agriculture rather than industry is held to be the original culprit for fostering the dualism of humans and nature in which "wild things are enemies of the tame; the wild other is not the context but the opponent of 'my' domain."[15]

What distinguishes *scientific industrialism* is that, among the three environmental philosophies of history being considered here, it alone looks ahead. Here, human salvation lies in the future, not in a return to an agrarian or pre-agrarian past. The task is to tame industrialism and temper its excesses, not turn our back on it. As a philosophy of *resource use* (a term abhorrent to agrarian and primitivist alike), scientific industrialism seeks to replace the anarchy of the market with a rational program of state control. Industrial capitalism may be ecologically wasteful but scientific expertise, when backed by legislation and an

activist state, can assure the sustained yield of natural resources so crucial to human welfare.

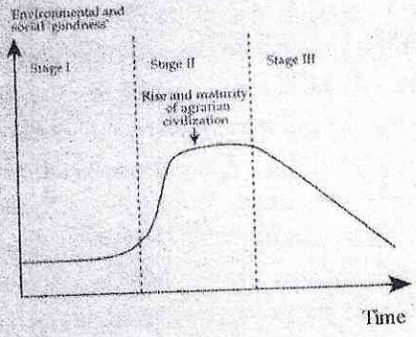
Like agrarianism and wilderness thinking, scientific industrialism has a distinctive three-stage interpretation of human history. A fine statement comes from the pen of that pioneering American forester of the nineteenth century Bernhard Fernow. In an essay titled "Battle of the Forest" Fernow, giving an interesting twist to primitivist narratives, starts with the process of ecological succession. Thus, the process of glaciation is followed by the formation of the soil, the gradual emergence of plants and then trees, culminating at last in what we know as virgin forest. This painfully slow and by no means unidirectional process is the "unwritten history of the battle of the forest," a "product of long struggles extending over centuries, nay thousands of years."

But the hurdles of nature are nothing compared to the threats posed by humans. For, pre-industrial society in general, and most especially farmers and shepherds, take "sides against the forest." Through "willful or careless destruction" they have "wasted the work of nature through thousands of years by the foolish destruction of the forest cover." They have "accomplished in many localities utter ruin . . . and turned them back into inhospitable deserts as they first were before the struggle of the forest had made them inhabitable."

Scientific forestry, next, inaugurates a more hopeful stage, but the habits of many lifetimes die hard. Fernow leaves us with a picture of the forester heroically battling the uneducated citizen, with the result very much in the balance: "The battle of

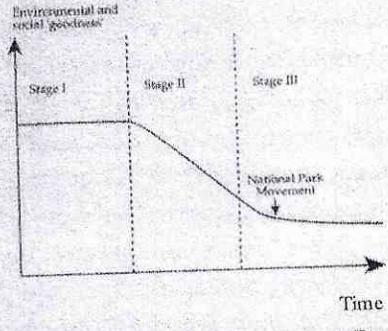
ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHIES: A GRAPHIC SUMMARY

AGRARIANISM

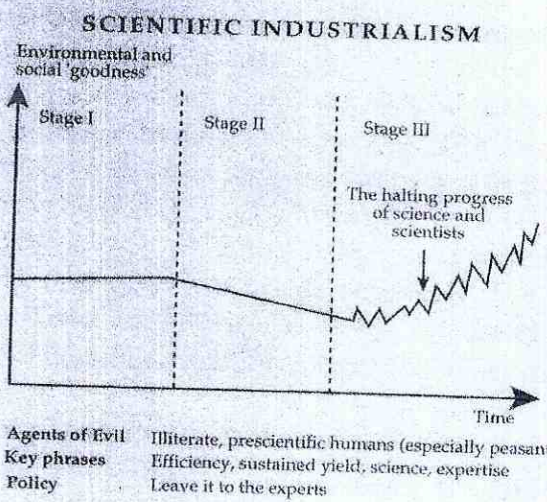


Agents of Evil The Machine, materialistic philosophy
Key phrases Technology "on the human scale", back to the land
Policy Go back to Stage II

PRIMITIVISM



Agents of Evil The plow that lacerates Mother Earth the white man
Key phrases Pristine/Primordial/Virgin/Unspoilt nature, the equality of sexes and of all species
Policy Go back to Stage I (eliminate 90 percent of the human population if necessary?)



the forest in this country is now being fought by man, the unintelligent and greedy carrying on a war of extermination, the intelligent and provident trying to defend the forest cover."[16]

Our three philosophies of environmental history do not usually speak directly to questions of gender. Still, one can between the lines distinguish three different kinds of emphases. The ideal role of women in agrarian society is vividly illustrated in the extract from Tagore. In her "time-honoured position of the wedded wife" she keeps the family and household going, while in the community at large women are the symbol of continuity, the vehicle by which traditions are passed on from one generation to another. From one point of view the role of women is here stable and well defined; from another it is severely circumscribed.

Primitivists tend to believe the latter, holding that it is only in hunter-gatherer societies that we find a relative equality of the sexes. This is ascribed to the absence of private property in land, and to the fact that women, as the primary gatherers of food, play a far more important role in economic life. Respect for women in primitive society, it is further argued, goes hand in hand with the "feminine principle" in nature. Finally, scientific industrialists claim that modern science enormously expands opportunities for both men and women. Only in modern society are women not barred from professional careers, only in the cities are they free of the petty tyrannies and superstitions of the village.

Over a century and more the principles of these utopias have been articulated in print and, less often, action. Words and sometimes deeds are the forms in which they typically manifest themselves, words and deeds quoted and analyzed at different points through this book. Also given above are three visual representations that capture the core beliefs, suppositions, prejudices, and prescriptions of the great environmental philosophies of our time.

III

I have thus far sketched the broad outlines of three environmental utopias. I now examine their articulation in two different contexts, India and the United States. One is the most powerful country in the industrial world, now moving toward a post-industrial economy and post-material society; the other is a