

Stoppings on my path to ecocentrism

L'île mystérieuse (*The Mysterious Island*) by Jules Verne was undoubtedly my favourite book in early adolescence (and still is). Now, in retrospect, 60 years later, I like to think that this book eventually put me on an ecocentric path. It's curious and symbolic that, as a child, I was fascinated much more by Verne's description of a magical island, its terrain and habitat, than by the inventiveness of one of the principal characters, engineer Smith, who used his knowledge to 'civilize' the island. I wanted it to remain wild. Telegraphs and hydropower stations didn't impress me; dugongs and peccaries did. And while many at my age were enthusiastic about space travel, I was crazy about going to sea.

No wonder that geography was my best-loved subject at school, and the only one where I got A grades. I remember my astonishment when I located two reefs on the map of the Pacific exactly at the spot of the two islands in Verne's novel. At twelve, I started writing my own sea novel about a journey in a submarine (I was the captain, of course) to the said reefs; the apex of the story was the discovery of the hull of the *Nautilus*, still lying in an underwater crevice.

Later, my childish imagination was further fuelled by an extinguished volcano in the eastern Crimea, *Karadag* (Black Mountain, in the Turkic language), where I stayed with my parents in summers. Fantastic bays, cornelians, underwater sea life; all Jules Verne's fantasies had suddenly materialized in my life. That was my own *l'île mystérieuse par excellence*. But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the magic bays had become piled with litter. At first, I

noticed the absence of crabs; then most of the fish were gone; then the site was declared a sanctuary and off-limits. I was downhearted, but had to admit that people should be kept away from this sacred place.

Chernobyl, the collapse of the Soviet Union and systems sciences

A far ruder awakening came with the Chernobyl catastrophe. For the first time, I felt the enormity of the problem with unbridled technology. Immediately after the catastrophe, I decided to lecture on ecology in the Polytechnic. I hungrily started to look for the 'green' literature that was only just beginning to trickle into the Soviet Union; in general I became far more receptive towards ecology and politics.

My professional interest at that time, as a scientist, was focused on methods for calculating electromagnetic fields in multilayer structures (comprising electrical machines, devices *etc.*). Similar research was being conducted in some geophysical and astrophysical areas to find a method to detect the composition of cosmic bodies. I had developed an efficient algorithm for cylindrical and spherical bodies, based on the so-called wave-impedance relations. At that time, I shifted to modelling multilayer media of the Earth. It was probably this fusion of modelling global systems and ecology that brought me eventually to systems sciences.

This shift in my scientific focus coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now I understand that the Soviet Union was a neatly tuned complex system, with ideally adjusted parts – ideology, infrastructure, science,

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culture, education *etc.* – all working to enhance the system. But systems are not permanent. Chernobyl was the first canary’s death, signalling the system’s failure. This weakness was caused by poor understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of technical systems.

Today, the collapse of the Soviet Union can easily be explained by the theory of complex systems. According to Joseph Tainter (2003), complex societies collapse because they exhaust their design (their “method of survival”) and cannot adapt to the diminishing return on investments. The Soviet Union had overstrained itself because of unreasonable military expenses, gigantic projects, space exploration, indulgence in heavy industry *etc.* – not to mention its obsolete paradigm of social organization. Nature and human systems simply rebelled against the state machine. But at that time (the late 1980s and early 1990s) these truths were not yet clear to me.

Around that time, Fritjof Capra, a systems ecologist and physicist, published some remarkable books, including *The Turning Point* (1982) and *Uncommon Wisdom* (1988), which I virtually swallowed. I wrote to him and received valuable publications from his Elmwood institute. Another real eye-opener for me was *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). All this material I treasured and conceived to use for future lectures.

Also, I can’t underestimate my growing interest in anarchist and pacifist ideas. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, many previously banned books became accessible. I studied the works of Pyotr Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin and Leo Tolstoy, and was amazed how closely these daring minds came to modern ideas of self-governance and self-reliance (Postnikov, 2004). Thus, gradually, I began departing from my professional interests into the realm of political ecology and philosophy. In 1991, I decided to end my career as a research scientist and return to the Polytechnic,

but this time as a lecturer in energy and ecology.

Meeting the like-minded

In 1995, I discovered the America House library (www.americahousekyiv.org) in Kiev, where I could access books by modern philosophers. I used to go and write notes there. *Resisting the Virtual Life* (Brook and Boal, 1995), *The Future Does Not Compute* (Talbot, 1995), *The Web of Life* (Capra, 1996), *The Rights of Nature* (Nash, 1988), *Environmental Ethics* (Rolston, 1988) and *Thinking Like A Mountain* (Seed *et al.*, 1988) were mind-blowing for me – and what’s more, they let me know that I was not alone in my ‘heresies’. In that library, I also used the internet for the first time. That was akin to an escape from prison. I ran into Jay Hanson’s Die-Off website (www.dieoff.org), read critical essays on capitalism and industrialism (capitalism was highly praised where I was, and still is), and found many valuable excerpts from works by William Catton, Howard Odum, James Lovelock, Lewis Mumford, Ivan Illich and other radical thinkers.

However, I didn’t find sympathizers among my friends or colleagues. Regretfully, the lectures that I wanted to give at Kiev Polytechnic on energy and ecology were not called for.

The next breakthrough, in the late 1990s, was my acquaintance with the deep ecologists. Through their website, I met David Orton, who invited me to join the international forum of Left Biocentrists. I agreed instantly. Left biocentrism, both philosophy and movement, shares many ideas with ecocentrism and is aimed at the recognition of the rights of non-humans as being on a par with those of humans (Orton, 1998). It is also bluntly anti-capitalism and anti-industrialism. Today, it has flowered into many sister movements worldwide, and discussions are still ongoing, although David and Arne Naess are no longer with us. For the last fifteen years, this forum has brought together many like-minded people: philosophers, activists, poets and ecologists. We have enriched each other’s

thinking, despite sometimes heated debates. And I will always remember David's openness and fearlessness of mind.

In 2004, I decided to meet Fritjof Capra, come rain or shine. Fritjof would come from Berkeley to the celebrated Schumacher college in the UK (www.schumachercollege.org.uk) to lecture on systems sciences. Unfortunately, I couldn't meet him there, but was lucky to attend another wonderful course, "Earth, Spirit and Action", in which I revelled. John Seed and Ruth Rosenheck conducted a Council of All Beings; Starhawk lectured on permaculture and methods for countering the police with green magic; Alastair McIntosh, a Scottish poet-activist, read TS Eliot and examined Celtic tradition; his wife, Verene Nicolas, gave an introduction to eco-psychology. At this course I also met two exceptional deep ecologists, Stephan Harding and Brian Goodwin.

In the college, someone spoke enthusiastically about the Findhorn ecovillage (www.ecovillagefindhorn.com) in Scotland. I eventually visited that place seven times, secretly hoping to remain there for good. Upon returning home to Ukraine, I found how hard it was to share this experience with other people, for many were already struggling for survival. All that I narrated seemed to them like a fairy tale.

David Orton had acquainted me with yet another remarkable man, Douglas R Tompkins, the co-founder of the world-famous companies Esprit and The North Face. Having earned millions, he abandoned his luxury urban life, purchased vast virgin lands in Argentina and Chile and turned them into nature reserves and parks. He developed a concept of the 'next economy', a simple and harmonious way of living, with beauty at the core of his philosophy (Tompkins, 2015). He was one of my heroes. He also helped me to publish Russian translations of two profound thinkers, William Catton (2006) and Jerry Mander (2007). I will never forget

a heartfelt meeting in Kiev with Doug and his wife Kristine. Driving across Ukraine, he examined the soil and was frustrated by the fact that it was too polluted for organic farming. We talked a lot about future plans for rejuvenating the Earth, but a tragic accident cut short his extraordinary life. He was a kindred spirit.

Ecopoetry, the last station

Poetry has always been a bulwark for me. My interest in ecopoetry probably stems from my father's love for Walt Whitman. Against all the odds, and despite the difficulties of life in the former Soviet Union, that love made him unsinkable. Poetry has saved me, too, from burning out. The 'inhuman' poetry of Robinson Jeffers, DH Lawrence and Emily Dickinson has enriched my life to an extent that no books by philosophers or scientists ever did.

Poetry has an intimate connection to beauty. Over the years, I – and not I alone – have come to the conclusion that it is the insensitivity to beauty that has brought us to a systemic crisis, and eventually may cause a universal die-off. Do we have the energy – and more importantly, the will – to eliminate all the ugliness that humanity has accumulated over the aeons?

L'île Mystérieuse ends with the explosion of the island. Could it be a secret allegory of the doomed Earth which haunted Jules Verne? After all, Jules Verne turned out to be correct in many of his visions of the future. ■

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