

# The significance of ecocentric vision

This special issue of *The Ecological Citizen* offers a range of positive political visions, as we try to salvage what we can from the ongoing ecocide and work towards a better future for all life on Earth.

While visions are often deprecated as utopian daydreams ungrounded in reality, ‘vision’ in the sense of seeing-forward, or seeing-into-being, is integral to human history. Its influence has often shaped history’s arc: leaders, riveted by visionary ideas, exercise profound influence over the societies they lead; and, more diffusely, visionary ideas shape the aspirations, activism and behavioural norms of the social body. As Julian Reid points out, “What would the histories of political struggles be without the immensity of the imaginaries that fuelled them? Take away the imagination and you stultify the subject of resistance” (2012: 161). Vision both assumes and incites free will – the human ability, at least in principle, to think and act outside the parameters delimited by sociocultural conditioning. It brings into purview an open, indeterminate space existing in the interstices of history, revealing that history is not deterministically governed by any one force or combination of forces (for example, inertia, power elites, mode of production or worldviews). The role of visionary thought in history’s course demonstrates that ideas have formative and directive power over human action. Marxism and neoliberalism are recent examples of visionary paradigms; from the perspective of the well-being of all Earthlings, however, both are dismal and busted.

A vitally important part of our work is thus political imagination, and all the essays here envision a better future by

taking seriously the idea of a genuinely sustainable polity. Naturally, they involve a critical response to what John Barry calls “actually existing unsustainability” (2012). Critique, however, is not enough; there must also be a positive imaginary inspiring a direction to work toward. If that seems ‘utopian’ it is not therefore a problem. As Quentin Skinner writes, “I have never understood why the charge of utopianism is necessarily thought to be an objection to a theory of politics. One legitimate aspiration of moral and political theory is surely to show us what lines of action we are committed to undertaking by the values we profess” (1998: 78–9).

What is difficult to imagine in our time is radical change taking place unless it is preceded by some degree of breakdown in the present order, providing openings for something new – and, we hope, better – to emerge. Such breakdowns are dangerous and difficult, but they also present an opportunity for ways to live more fully human lives – deeper, slower, and richer in the true wealth of life – that are respectful of all nature. Barry concurs: “A crisis after all can be seen as an opportunity to re-evaluate and reflect on ‘what really matters’” (2012: 58). Hence the subject of the forthcoming semi-themed issue of *The Ecological Citizen* – namely, collapse. But as ever, we shall continue to favour perspectives which don’t assume *Homo sapiens* is the only species whose extinction would matter.

If, or more likely when, collapse occurs, then ecocentrics must be ready. As Richard Sylvan and David Bennett (1994: 174) point out:

Theory is very important for guiding change. If the opportunity for revolutionary

## Patrick Curry and Eileen Crist

### About the author

Patrick and Eileen are co-editors of this special issue on the biodiversity crisis.

Patrick is a writer and scholar based in London, UK, with his works including *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Polity Press, 2018). He is Editor-in-Chief of *The Ecological Citizen*.

Eileen has been teaching at Virginia Tech in the Department of Science and Technology in Society since 1997. She has written and co-edited numerous papers and books, with her work focusing on biodiversity loss and destruction of wild places, along with pathways to halt these trends. Eileen lives in Blacksburg, VA, USA.

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political change should arise, as it does from time to time, then deep environmentalism needs to be prepared. It should aim for a sound appreciation of what counts as an appropriate revolution, and ideally be organized for it, so that control does not go or revert to forces of environmental darkness.

In particular, we need to imagine alternatives to the neoliberal orthodoxy, which, although moribund, still maintains a stranglehold on economies, politics, societies and cultures. The result is not only to reduce human beings in all their complex multiplicity to individual customers, consumers, producers, managers and, on occasion, voters. Neoliberalism is deeply anthropocentric, as well as (despite its protestations to the contrary) contemptuous of the human poor and disadvantaged. The attitudes and practices driving the exploitation and destruction of nature are often indistinguishable from those threatening and impoverishing humans (including indigenous peoples), and to that extent any resistance helps both nonhuman and human worlds. But where anthropocentrism dominates – even in progressive movements – there is always the danger of selectively trying to save only what is deemed useful to humanity. We firmly believe that that is not only unjust, but would end by failing humans and nonhumans alike.

The issue of anthropocentrism throws a harsh light on our political plight, because it doesn't only apply to politicians, CEOs, bankers and bosses (as well as their supporters). Much of the opposition to the powerful, for example, comes from social justice activists. But the identity politics the latter espouse is overwhelmingly human-centred, largely deaf to the cries of the Earth and the suffering of our fellow Earthlings. Furthermore, much of the social justice agenda is comfortably compatible with neoliberal ideology and shares some of its mode: a rejection of limits, an ideal of complete autonomy and self-making, and a fetishization of consumer choice.

We might also consider the more traditional left. Recently, two worthy and respected exemplars have published new books: Guy Standing (2019) and George Monbiot (2019). Both – the former in depth and detail – rightly advocate recovering the commons from its privatization by elites. Imperative though that is, however, it leaves out of account something of more paramount importance: the complete dependence of all social, cultural and political commons on the health of the *natural* commons. Thus Standing repeatedly refers to ‘our commons,’ overlooking the greater truth that it is in fact we who belong to the commons. Monbiot, for his part, pays some homage to nonhuman nature in one of his many chapters. However, the crisis cited in his title is fundamentally one of our relationship with *more-than-human* nature, and the ‘new narrative’ he seeks must have that at its very heart. Treating it as merely one consideration among others cannot finally succeed.

Even with Extinction Rebellion, whose courage and tenacity can only be applauded, it is unclear to what extent the extinction that matters most is only our own. If this were indeed the case, it would make that outcome more likely, not less. A single-minded focus on climate crisis and how it affects humanity – while excluding or downplaying the equally serious and immoral onslaught on biodiversity – would reflect and reinforce the playbook of the establishment's anthropocentrism. If, as it appears, the leaders of XR and the School Strikes also do not consider human overpopulation to be a problem, let alone a serious one, that points in the same worrying direction.

Let's remind ourselves of the fundamental driver of both anthropogenic climate change and mass extinctions, of which they and a host of related problems are symptoms: the utterly unsustainable impact of humanity on Earth's ecosystems, places, and other life-forms. Or more briefly, too much human activity by too many humans. In a word, overshoot.

We cannot evade or solve this challenge by censoring the one per cent, culpable

though they are; nor by blaming capitalism, however heinous its crimes. Even after allowing for the greater impact of relatively wealthy residents of the overdeveloped world, and for men overall as compared to women, it is excessive human impact as such that is the ultimate culprit. Even normal human activities, sufficiently multiplied, are enough to drive down and eventually destroy ecological health. In this sense, Pogo's dictum was right: we have met the enemy, and, short of radical change, he is indeed us.

It follows ineluctably that what is actually needed is an historically unprecedented polity, society and culture which puts the Earth and its needs at its heart, initiating a radical programme of collective self-restraint and downscaling of the human presence. Not just fewer children but a rapid move towards families with none, or at most one child (while taking much better care of those who already exist and embracing adoption for enlarging families). Not just eating less meat but eating none, now. Not only fewer cars but drastically fewer, no matter how 'green.' Not just less infrastructural and other development but no new development whatsoever where it would require converting any relatively wild nature into land instrumentalized for human purposes; otherwise, minimizing human buildout and emphasizing maintenance of what already exists. Also urgently needed is the reconversion of large expanses of rural land that we have colonized back into natural areas that are again wild and free. Additionally, we need

to establish and connect strictly protected marine areas for half the global ocean.

To be sure, these things can and should be done more, rather than less, intelligently and humanely. But done they must be, if we are not to be done to. Those who resist that mandate are only giving Malthus, whom they often detest, the last and grimmest laugh. Yet needed actions and policies must not be instituted solely through discouragement and prohibitions. A historical redirection will also take tremendous positive energy, motivated by an unshakeable love of life on Earth and a corresponding desire to see it flourish.

Yet even here, at such an apotheosis of deep green virtue, a hurdle remains which ecocentric visions must clear if they are to succeed. It is the fundamental paradox of ecocentrism: in order to survive and flourish ourselves, we humans must learn to love the Earth for its own sake, and change our lives accordingly. That is perhaps the ultimate challenge. ■

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