

Turn Around and Step Forward: Ideology and Utopia in the Environmental Movement

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Insufficiently radical environmentalism is inadequate to the problems that confront us; but overly radical environmentalism risks alienating people with whom, in a democracy, we must find common cause. Building on Paul Ricoeur's work, which shows how group identity is constituted by the tension between ideology and utopia, this essay asks just how radical effective environmentalism should be. Two "case studies" of environmental agenda—that of Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, and that of David Brower—serve to frame the important issues of cooperation and confrontation. The essay concludes that environmentalism must lead with its utopian aspirations rather than its willingness to compromise.

The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.

—Bertrand Russell

I was not always unreasonable, and I am sorry for that.

—David Brower

Introduction

There are good reasons to hope that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift in the public perception of environmental crises.¹ Anthropogenic climate change, once a hotly debated hypothesis, is now generally accepted as a reality demanding immediate attention thanks to the persistence of good scientists and their public spokespersons (Bill McKibben, Al Gore and others) There is growing awareness of and concern about peak oil, thanks to a brief encounter with five dollar per gallon gasoline in the United States, oil wars in the Middle

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East, and periodic belligerence between the United States and oil producing nations such as Russia and Venezuela. An increasing number of people in nations across the globe say that environmental sustainability is an important issue, and their governments are beginning to respond. Although the COP15 meeting in Copenhagen failed to deliver a strong, effective, and binding treaty, the unprecedented attention of so many heads of state, as well as a groundswell of public opinion leading up to the conference, suggests that the stars of public and political will may, finally, be coming into alignment. If so, it would appear that the time is ripe for pushing, and pushing very hard, for the environmental agenda. This has, to some degree, already begun to happen. As environmental problems loom larger, environmentalists use language that is (justifiably) more and more alarming, and positions that once seemed radical now seem more mainstream.

However, in a democracy, as environmental rhetoric becomes more strident and alarming, it risks alienating the very people it needs to convince.² This is problematic, because any effective response to climate change requires that all, or at least most, of the significant players buy in. This is true on both the national and the international scale. Environmental legislation will require coalition building in order to be successful. Environmentalists need to establish (1) a broad-based alliance that takes seriously environmental challenges, which is (2) willing to act boldly to address those issues. The problem is that “bold action” tends to work against “building a broad coalition” because most citizens—and therefore most of their representatives—are, for a variety of reasons, reluctant to embrace radical changes in their world or their lifestyles. As Bill McKibben pointed out almost twenty years ago, Americans are fond of the status quo: “our sense of entitlement is almost impossible to shake” (1989, 168). The more radical environmental rhetoric becomes, the less enthusiastically and sincerely people embrace it. A few examples will help to illustrate the problem.

First, studies done by the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies indicate that, while people are remarkably unified in their concern with environmental degradation, they are uncertain as to who they should trust when it comes to competing claims about the environment, suspecting radical “spin” of the truth from all sides, including environmentalists (2007, 2–3).³ Second, studies have found that while many people have a sense that we are on the verge of an environmental disaster and many have a vague sense of or tenuous commitment to the notion that “something should

2. See for example Pope (2009).

3. This confusion was particularly evident in the 2004 survey, but was somewhat less prominent in 2007. Also see Pope (2009). This skepticism, at least in some segment of the population, has no doubt been exacerbated by the November 2009 “Climategate” emails in which hacked emails from researchers at the University of East Anglia seemed to suggest a manipulation of data to support claims about anthropogenic climate change.

be done,” over forty percent of the general public thinks “environmentalist” is synonymous with “radical” and “irrational” (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 11).⁴ Finally, a brief personal anecdote: when I make arguments for the virtues of simplicity—emotional, spiritual, economic, or environmental—my brothers think of Ted Kaczynski, not Henry David Thoreau.

The point is that the majority of people in our society, including many people who consider themselves environmentally concerned, are alienated by rhetoric that they perceive to be radical. This, however, is problematic given that the science indicates that radical change is needed, and fast. What, then, is the role of radical environmental thought and discourse in the contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural climate? What are we to make of the growing demand by environmentalists to reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to 350ppm in a world that seems unable to meet the previous, less ambitious target of 450ppm? We appear to be left with a choice between standing our ground and losing the battle for lack of allies or compromising and, despite more numerous allies, losing the battle for lack of sufficiently bold action. Given that “radical” environmentalism can be both energizing and alienating, just how radical should environmentalism be?

The Social Imaginary: Ideology and Utopia

We can find some useful resources for considering the role of radicalism in environmental thought in the hermeneutic philosophy of the late Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s political thought examines the way in which the “social imaginary”—that is, the way in which various social groups understand themselves via images, which Ricoeur calls the “practical function” of the imagination—develops in the tension between innovation and sedimentation, revolution and tradition, critique and conviction.

In terms of the social imaginary that defines our political, cultural, and social communities, “the truth of our condition . . . is accessible to us only through a certain number of imaginative practices, among them, ideology and utopia” (Ricoeur 1991, 181).⁵ The positive functions of ideology and utopia

4. Also see Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger (2007). Thus, for my current purposes, we can avoid having to come up with a definition for “radical environmentalism,” because many people still view environmentalism itself as radical.

5. Also see Ricoeur (1986). Ricoeur’s work on the social imaginary develops out of his work on metaphor. Metaphor, says Ricoeur, is not a deviant use of nouns marking a shift in denomination, but a deviant use of predicates that is characteristic of the sentence as a whole. Utterances are metaphorical, not words. “The theory of metaphor invites us to relate imagination to certain uses of language, allowing us to see it as an aspect of *semantic innovation*” (171). As Aristotle noted in the *Poetics*, “good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars” (1459a7-8). Of course, if semantic innovation is to have any heuristic force, if it is going to teach us something as well as entertain us, it must have a referent; it must actually refer to some reality. While it might appear that, because of its reliance on imagination, fiction does not refer

develop and maintain analogical ties between the self and others. That is, to say ideology and utopia are two of the main practices that shape our social connections; we understand our communities, our relationships to those communities, and our relationships to other individuals who are included in or excluded from those communities in virtue of these co-constituting imaginative practices. However, these positive functions are counterbalanced on the one hand by the seemingly antagonistic relationship between ideology and utopia and, on the other, by pathological aspects within each that can obscure its positive contribution. Thus, says Ricoeur, “the productive imagination . . . can be restored only through a critique of the semipathological and mutually antagonistic aspects of the social imaginary” (181).

Ideology

In everyday speech we tend to think of ideology in terms of ideologues, in the context of the liberal-conservative “debates” of the presidential election cycles or in terms of “judicial activism” and nominees to the Supreme Court. Philosophically, ideology is associated first with Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* and, most conspicuously, with Karl Marx’s critique of ideology in *The German Ideology* and elsewhere. However, while ideology does serve to cement certain culturally constructed ideas and perspectives, Ricoeur warns us that it “cannot be reduced to the function of distortion and dissimulation, as Marxism would have it” (1991, 182). Ideology is a necessary part of group identity, and it does not always work as an instrument of domination or oppression. Following Max Weber, Ricoeur points out that ideology is constituted on the most basic level of social action and meaningful behavior. “Ideology . . . [is] tied to the necessity of any group to give itself an image of itself, to ‘play itself’ in the theatrical sense of the word, to put itself at issue and on stage” (182).⁶ In other words, ideology is constitutive of *any* social identity. There is no social group that does not relate to its own being, as least in part, through such an imaginary representation of itself. Every group has a “face” that it presents to the world, and that face is something members of the group shape and develop through the interpretation of relevant symbols and stories. We narrate and describe who we are, what makes us “us” and not “them.”

However, the omnipresence of ideology does not eliminate the element of distortion that Marx identifies or the possibility that such distortion can

to reality, Ricoeur insists that this is not the case. Poetics does refer to reality due to a “split” between its first order reference (the “no place” of fiction) and its second order reference (reality distinguished from and in relation to this ‘no place’). This “reference effect” of fiction allows it to redescribe reality and life, opening new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of disbelief in an earlier description. (Ricoeur 1986, 175). Metaphor and imagination allow us to “try out,” so to speak, other realities.

6. “The role of ideology is incorporated into the most basic social bond . . . we cannot speak of a real activity being preideological or nonideological” (Ricoeur 1991, 183).

overwhelm and obscure the positive aspects of ideology. The pathological aspect of ideology comes from

its function of reinforcing and repeating the social tie in situations that are after-the-fact. Simplification, schematization, stereotyping, and ritualization arise out of a distance that never ceases to grow between real practice and the interpretations through which the group becomes conscious of its existence and its practice. (Ricoeur 1991, 182)

The distance between the events that a group claims as significant and the interpretation after the fact of those events leaves open the possibility not only of distortion via simplification and ritualization, but also the possibilities of active dissimulation. Vicious expressions of patriotism and nationalism—which manifest themselves in parochialism, scapegoating, racism, sectarianism, and, at the extreme, “ethnic cleansing” and genocide—are examples of pathological ideology. The possibility of a pathological expression of ideology is especially acute when ideology is co-opted by systems of power or authority, as in the case of various totalitarian regimes. “The function of dissimulation clearly wins out over the function of integration when ideological representations are captured by the system of authority in any given society. [Because] all authority seeks to legitimate itself” (182–83).

Utopia

Unlike ideology, utopia does not engage in dissimulation; it is what it says it is—the imaginary project of another reality (Ricoeur 1991, 183). Of course, there are many different kinds of utopias and therefore utopia, as a genre, must be defined in terms of its form rather than its content. The central idea of utopia is expressed in the literal meaning of the word as *u-topos*, that is, a no-place. Such an a-topographic space extends the field of the possible beyond the real, helping us to imagine other realities, other ways of living and being. According to Ricoeur, the “extraterritoriality” of utopia allows us to “take a fresh look at our reality.” It allows us to rethink “the nature of family, consumption, government, religion, and so on” (184). Utopian thinking is prominent in environmental visions of a carbon-neutral society, or in abandoning globalization in favor of local economies.

Utopia, then, is the counterpoint to ideology; it is the *yang* to ideology’s *yin*. Where the latter is a force of social integration and cohesion, the former is a force of social subversion and critique.

What is at stake is precisely the “given” in every system of authority, namely, the excess of the claims of legitimacy in relation to the belief of the members of that community. Just as ideologies tend to fill in the void or conceal it, utopias, one could say, expose the undeclared surplus value of authority and unmask the pretense common to all systems of legitimacy. (Ricoeur 1991, 184).

Utopia and ideology are, like *yin* and *yang*, in constant, interdependent movement against each other. Thus, utopias not only critique and subvert power, they offer alternative ways of arranging and deploying power. In imagining these alternative societies, the pathological aspect of utopia becomes evident. Arising from a nowhere (*u-topos*), utopias have a tendency to

subordinate reality to dreams, [fixate on] perfectionist designs, and so on. [There is, on some accounts, a sort of] schizophrenia at work here, a logic of all or nothing, ignoring the work of time . . . disdain for the intermediate stages and an utter lack of interest in taking a first step in the direction of the idea . . . blindness with respect to the contradictions inherent in action . . . nostalgia for a lost paradise concealed under the guise of futurism. (185)

If ideology has a tendency to resist any change, utopia has a tendency to reject anything short of the complete change it envisions. Anything short of the complete revolution or the fullness of the *eschaton* is rejected as a compromise in favor of maintaining the status quo.

The chiasmus

So ideology and utopia resist and oppose each other; and, in addition, each form harbors within itself a pathological excess. How are we to proceed in the face of these difficulties? “First, we must come to think together ideology and utopia in terms of their most positive, most constructive, and . . . most healthy modalities.” (Ricoeur 1991, 185). We must try to hold together the integrative function of ideology and the subversive function of utopia. Although these two phenomena may appear mutually exclusive, in fact they dialectically imply each other. The chiasmus of ideology and utopia is the result of two fundamental directions of the social imaginary: (1) the move toward “integration, repetition and reflection” and (2) the “excentric tendency toward wandering.” (185) This chiasmus is irreducible. The most repetitive ideology is still a mediation of the immediate social bond. It therefore produces, or at least exists in, a gap between its interpretation or narrative and the lived reality it interprets. This distancing is not unlike the explicitly excentric function of utopia. Conversely, despite their inherently critical function, utopias all posit an idealized form of social cohesion that is not unlike ideology. Utopias also make claims about human nature and the nature of the social bond.

Now we can see why each term develops its specifically pathological function. Each dysfunction corresponds to one of the forces of the imaginative process: integration and critique. We take possession of the creative power of imagination only through a critical relation to these two forms, “as though, to cure the folly of utopia we had to call on the healthy function of ideology, and as though the necessary critique of ideologies can only be conducted by a consciousness capable of looking at itself from the perspective of ‘nowhere’” (Ricoeur 1991, 185).

Ideology and Utopia in the Environmental Movement

While Ricoeur's own reflections on ideology and utopia do not explicitly engage environmental politics, his insights in this area are eminently applicable to the question at hand. The fundamentally utopian aspirations of most environmental discourse should be abundantly clear. Given the radically unsustainable nature of our current systems, environmentalism is first and foremost a critical endeavor. In criticizing an unsustainable status quo, environmentalists are engaged in imagining an alternative, even when they do not fully elaborate the proposed alternative. Ideology, in turn, is also operative in environmentalism in at least two ways. First, there is the ideology that is the object of environmental critique, the cultural, political, social, and economic status quo: the ideology of consumption; belief in unlimited growth; the insistence on unrestrained commons; and bald egoism in a *laissez-faire* economy without any of the safeguards that even Adam Smith recognized as necessary. However, in addition to the unsustainable ideologies critiqued by environmentalism, there are ideologies operative *within* environmentalism itself. This second ideological pole is evident in, for example, culturally framed foci for environmental concern, such as the North American emphasis on wilderness preservation (Guha 1999).⁷ Although there are increasingly global or universal concerns (e.g., anthropogenic climate change) many other environmental concerns are deeply informed by a particular perspective or ideology.

Keeping in mind that ideology and utopia are co-constitutive aspects of any social or political movement rather than two independent phenomena, how should the integrative function of ideology and the critical function of utopia play out in the environmental movement? Two case studies will serve to illustrate the tensions between utopia and ideology in the modern environmental landscape: the "death of environmentalism" heralded by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, and the uncompromising activism of David Brower.

Study One: The Death of Environmentalism

In the controversial essay "The Death of Environmentalism" (2004), the follow up "Death Warmed Over" (2005), and their book-length *Breakthrough* (2007), Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus make a challenging argument that the environmental movement as traditionally conceived is on its last legs and that new thinking is in order if environmental causes are to have any hope of success. This argument is, at root, an attack on the environmental ideology that has formed over the past forty years, an ideology that Shellenberger and Nordhaus contend is no longer capable of achieving environmental goals due to the stagnation and resultant ossification of its vision. The fundamental

7. The point here is not to validate or invalidate the idea of wilderness preservation, but merely to point out that what one thinks of as "environmentalism" is framed, to a large degree, by one's hermeneutic and imaginative horizons.

question addressed by “The Death of Environmentalism” is whether current environmental policy proposals are sufficient to address the looming environmental crisis (i.e., the big picture issues such as global climate change). Shellenberger and Nordhaus conclude that they are not, and that a fundamental shift in strategy is needed if environmental advocates are to have any chance of successfully participating in the political process. Their argument begins by noting that people and organizations representing the environmental movement today find themselves politically less powerful than they were fifteen years ago and, as a result,

modern environmentalism is no longer capable of dealing with the world’s most serious ecological crisis [global warming] [I]n their public campaigns, not one of America’s environmental leaders is articulating a vision of the future commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis. Instead, they are promoting technical policy fixes like pollution controls and higher vehicle mileage standards—proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem. (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 6)

Like generals preparing to fight the last war, environmental activists, groups and leaders tend to focus on (1) specific, and narrowly defined, issues that (2) are susceptible to a technological or legislative fix:

The three-part strategic framework for environmental policy-making hasn’t changed in forty years: first, define a problem (e.g., global warming) as “environmental.” Second, craft a technical remedy (e.g., cap-and-trade). Third, sell the technical proposal to legislators through a variety of tactics, such as lobbying, third party allies, research reports, advertising, and public relations. (9)

Shellenberger and Nordhaus suggest that we need to take a step back from fighting small battles and advocating technical solutions to articulate a “big vision” and a “core set of values” (7).⁸ In other words, what is needed is a *shift in the cultural imagination*.

The successes of the 1960s and 1970s led to the belief that the traditional environmental protection framework would be sufficient to the challenges; however, it has not been. Today, because of the way problems are framed, environmentalism is merely another special interest (as opposed to a global set of eco-socio-politico-cultural values) (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 8). The problem lies in the way we frame “environmental” problems. The error, they claim, stems from a category mistake with respect to “the environment.” The environment is a mental category—it is not a “thing” out there, but an idea or concept we use to describe (parts of) the world—that, I would suggest,

8. Such a focus is, ultimately, what brought George W. Bush to power in 2000 (and, arguably, Regan in 1980).

means this is a *hermeneutic* problem. We constitute the environment, nature, wilderness, and the problems associated with each. Unfortunately,

environmentalists do their work as though these [categories] are literal rather than figurative truths. They tend to see language in general as representative rather than constitutive of reality. This is typical of liberals who are, at their core, children of the enlightenment [sic] who believe that they arrived at their identity and politics through a rational and considered process. They expect others in politics should do the same and are constantly surprised and disappointed when they don't. (12–13)

Because the problem lies in the way we frame and interpret issues, political battles against anti-environmental ideological commitments will not be overcome by arguing over science. We are involved in a war over core values—Shellenberger and Nordhaus use the term “culture war”—“and it won't be won by appealing to the rational consideration of our collective self-interest” (10).⁹ Aristotle agrees. “If arguments were in themselves enough to make men good, they would justly . . . have won very great rewards. . . . [However,] while they seem to have power to encourage and stimulate [a *few*], they are not able to encourage the *many* to nobility and goodness” (1925, 270).

This account clarifies several critical issues related to ideology and utopia and their role in informing environmental discourse, radical or otherwise. First, Shellenberger and Nordhaus remind us of the social and political realities in which environmental policy and legislation are crafted, and the necessity of a shrewd and pragmatic approach when considering who can be convinced, of what, and how quickly. Second, they offer a convincing argument that merely distributing the facts about climate change more widely and more clearly is unlikely to bring about broad-based support for radical and systemic change. We need to articulate an environmental agenda that is part of a far-reaching, core-value vision that will bring the largest possible number of people, or

9. The number of Americans who agreed that, “Most of the people actively involved in environmental groups are extremists, not reasonable people,” leapt from thirty-two percent in 1996 to forty-one percent in 2000. The support for the environment is broad but disturbingly shallow. “The truth is that for the vast majority of Americans, the environment never makes it into their top ten list of things to worry about. Protecting the environment is indeed supported by a large majority—it's just not supported very strongly” (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 11). While growing concern about anthropogenic climate change may have moderated these numbers to some degree in the years since 2000—the economic crisis, which many analysts suggest will get worse before (if) it improves—has again reduced the public perception of the importance of climate change and the urgency of addressing it. On January 19, 2009 Rasmussen Reports published the results of a national survey that showed 44% of the population still thinks global warming is the result of “planetary trends,” not human activity, an *increase* from 2008 (34%) (Rasmussen Reports 2009). A 2009 Pew Research poll indicates that global climate change ranks last in the top 20 concerns of voters in the U.S. (Fahey 2009).

at least a workable majority of them, on board. An overly narrow view of “environmentalism” has put us in a position where we have few political allies and, therefore, relatively few political successes. However, if we consider the broader social issues and frame environmental issues in a way that acknowledges other legitimate concerns, we will find powerful allies for pushing important aspects of the “environmental” agenda. One strength of Shellenberger and Nordhaus’s position is their recognition that these changes are more likely to succeed as part of a big-picture environmental vision that aims for *both* environmental sustainability (preserving some wilderness, reducing greenhouse gasses, etc.) *and* human flourishing within that environment (e.g., producing good jobs, fueling a sustainable economy, etc.). To accomplish this, “environmentalists need to tap into the creative worlds of myth-making, even religion, not to better sell narrow and technical policy proposals but rather to figure out who we are and who we need to be” (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 34).

However, some of the strengths of this account—an appreciation of political reality and the need for unconventional alliances—are also its liabilities. The importance of political reality can be overplayed, ignoring the degree to which political reality is malleable and susceptible to change under the right pressure. One of the central arguments of “The Death of Environmentalism” is that environmental problems must be framed in such a way that a solution is at least possible. This, however, might seem to suggest that we should only pose questions we can answer, or propose programs that we know we can “sell,” that is, that we engage in environmental advocacy that is acceptable within the already established parameters of our society, that our environmentalism operate within the *ideological* boundaries set by the wider American public. This is problematic because it does not take much insight to realize that the politically feasible may well be environmentally disastrous. We need radical change; we need *utopian* environmental aspirations. Likewise, sensitivity to the need for political allies can, at times, undermine sufficiently radical change. It would be naive to think that environmentalists can take on big business, unions, industry, and a generally apathetic public and get all of these diverse groups to adopt environmentalist policies unconditionally. Alliances and coalitions always involve some give-and-take, some compromise. Indeed, *compromise* is the unspoken watchword of Shellenberger and Nordhaus’s vision. Their utopian critique of environmental ideology is made in the context of a pragmatic recognition of the broader social ideology; indeed, for Schellenberger and Nordhaus, the critique of broader, unsustainable social ideologies takes a back seat to the critique of ideologies internal to environmentalism itself.

Study Two: David Brower

David Brower was the most successful, and polarizing, environmental figure of his generation. He elevated the Sierra Club, almost by force of will, from a mountaineering club to one of the most formidable environmental forces in

politics. As the Executive Director, Brower led fights to save Dinosaur National Monument and, later, the Grand Canyon from being flooded by proposed dams, and he led the Club to its victory in the landmark Wilderness Act of 1964. However, Brower's actions also lost the Sierra Club its tax-exempt status and caused a rift in its constituency and leadership, resulting, in 1969, in his ouster as Executive Director, a post he had held since 1953. The polarizing nature of his personality and tactics are evident in statements made by Sierra Club members (McPhee 1971, 208–22):¹⁰

He was the most effective single force in the conservation effort in this country. And he still is. (213)

He is a combination poet, naturalist, and politician, a generalist in the fight to save the environment. He is tough enough to get into the thick of back-alley fights. He thinks that to win fights you have to have uncompromising militancy. (212)

He [became], over the years, increasingly less tolerant of the conservation opposition. (209)

This is why the Sierra Club membership has grown, however. He has built it from seven thousand to seventy-seven thousand. People, particularly younger people, flock to the cause. They are fed up with traditional attitudes. Brower once had a willingness to see the other point of view, but now he is a flaming firebrand, and he has split the Sierra Club right down the middle. (209)

I will say this: I prefer Dave's vices to the virtues of his enemies. (209)

He is a great practitioner of brinksmanship, and this time he went much too far. (211)

On July 13, 1989, Brower wrote a letter to Doug Scott, who was then the Conservation Director of the Sierra Club. In his letter, Brower takes the Sierra Club to task for its willingness to compromise. "At the Sierra Club's International Assembly here in Ann Arbor you listened to my 'rhetoric' and I listened to your advice about the real world of decision making. Perhaps we're even. We are not, however, in agreement." (Brower 1989). Brower concluded

10. Technically, the Sierra Club accepted Brower's resignation; however, coming as it did at the end of years of pro-Brower and anti-Brower division, to say this was the culmination of an "ouster" is no exaggeration. Although Brower eventually reconciled with the Sierra Club and rejoined its Board of Directors, in 2000 he again resigned in protest over the club's stance on immigration. Brower had a similarly turbulent relationship with the Friends of the Earth, which he founded after resigning as Executive Director of the Sierra Club. Brower also founded or co-founded other important environmental groups, including the Earth Island Institute and the League of Conservation Voters.

this letter by challenging Scott, and us, to “turn around and step forward.”¹¹ If Shellenberger and Nordhaus represent one version of a mediation between ideology and utopia in the environmental movement, a version that emphasizes very strongly the need for compromise in order to achieve political ends, a valuable juxtaposition can be found in Brower’s exhortation to “turn around and step forward.”

After the debacle of Glen Canyon Dam, “compromise” became a four-letter word for David Brower. Given this fact, a simple, literal reading of Brower’s phrase would be that “going back” (i.e., turn around and go back to where you were) is an improvement. American *laissez faire* capitalism, with maximizing profit and unrestrained growth as first principles, pursues technology and development with short-term gains in mind and, therefore, with little if any substantive concern for the long-term impact on the environment and human well-being. The solution, then, would be to reverse direction, to reject development and the search for technological solutions in favor of a voluntarily chosen simplicity applied on the individual and social scale. Such a position has a certain appeal—Brower himself made numerous other comments that suggest his own suspicion of technology and antipathy toward growth—and logically, of course, such contemporary Luddism would indeed solve the problem. However, such a position is likely to be untenable on a broad scale, and there are other possibilities for reading reversal as the way forward for the environmental movement and, indeed, for the human race.

The first directive, *turn around*, seems to call for a reversal, a movement of regression or return. However, *step forward* asserts or implies that this movement is no mere reversal, but is at the same time a movement of progress. Brower does not simply say we should “stop” or “step back” at the edge of the environmental precipice, which would be, in his own words, “retrograde advice” (1977). Rather, he suggests that the turn from the abyss is compatible with a step forward, one that will certainly include the reversal of disturbing

11. Brower was playing on a quote attributed to Alywn Rhys. “We cannot escape by forging on, resolutely and regardless, driven by the unmitigated inertia of our outworn habits, until we have forced ourselves over the brink in the ‘giant step for mankind’ nobody needs. When you have reached the edge of an abyss, Alwyn Rees [sic] said in Wales, the only progressive move you can make is to step backward. A New Zealander whose name escapes me improved upon this retrograde advice with an alternative; turn around, and step forward” (Brower 1977). In a statement that echoes Brower, Shellenberger and Nordhaus conclude their original article by claiming, “One thing is certain: if we hope to achieve our objectives around global warming and a myriad of intimately related problems then we need to take an urgent *step backwards* before we can take *two steps forward*. . . .” (Schellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 30). However, while similar to Brower’s comment, Shellenberger and Nordhaus are here commenting on environmentalist ideology rather than the broader socio-cultural ideology; we need to re-imagine the way forward. For the importance of narrative in environmental ethics, see Treanor (2008).

trends (e.g., conspicuous consumption, more is better, disposable view of goods, etc.) but which is not reducible to it. Brower's exhortation to "turn around and step forward" is neither blindly progressive (which would be a vigorous, perhaps unconsidered, step forward) nor simply regressive (which would merely be a step backward).¹² He is not advocating a return to the past, but a step toward a different future/

Although Brower was the most successful environmental activist of his generation, and a genius in mustering public support for his causes (often preserving bits of land that few, if any, of his supporters would ever see), he famously quipped as part of a quasi-apologia, "I was not always unreasonable, and I am sorry for that" (Brower 2000, 26). Brower's view of compromise is clear in his aforementioned letter to Doug Scott. However, Brower was no blind utopian idealist; he was acutely aware of the need to build support for his vision. This becomes evident with a more nuanced grasp of his rejection of compromise, which was not born of a stubborn individualism or destructive dogmatism, but rather from an attempt to mobilize people with a utopian vision.

My thesis is that compromise is often necessary but that it ought not originate with the Sierra Club. We are to hold fast to what we believe is right, fight for it, and find allies and adduce all possible arguments for our cause. If we cannot find enough vigor in us or them to win, then let someone else propose the compromise. We thereupon work hard to coax it our way. We become a nucleus around which the strongest force can build and function. (25)

Brower recognized that some compromises would be made for the greater good, but he desired that the Sierra Club maintain itself as the utopian pole around which the American environmental imagination developed, because the seemingly unrealistic aspirations of environmental utopianism are precisely the things that inspire activists and allies. "Small plans do not inspire people; bold plans inspire people" (*Monumental* 2004). Following this logic, Brower argued that the Sierra Club needed a bolder and less flexible vision rather than a more moderate and flexible one.

Of course, the obvious objection to this aggressive and uncompromising approach is that it ultimately led to the loss of the Sierra Club's tax exempt status, the ouster of Brower as Executive Director, the sundering of lifelong

12. Which is why "moving forward by turning around" requires a hermeneutic reading. A final solution to the environmental crisis will be found in technologies that merely postpone the depletion or irredeemable pollution of all natural resources. Moreover, rational arguments are unlikely to produce the desired change in behavior, because consumption patterns operate, for the most part, on a sub-conscious level of taste and preference. Rather, dealing with this crisis demands that we re-imagine ourselves, including our relationships with each other and with the natural world, and this is an essentially hermeneutic task. "Old ways of seeing do not change because of evidence, they change because a new language captures the imagination" (Turner 1996, 66).

friendships, etc. However, we should recognize that, in spite of his utopian orientation (indeed, on his account, *because* of it) Brower was the most successful environmentalist of his generation. Moreover, although he was unwilling to compromise, he was nevertheless exceptionally skilled at building ideological consensus around his ideas. Take, for example, his innovative use of media (e.g., books, movies, advertisements in the *New York Times*)—the style of which is entirely consonant with Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ call for harnessing the creative powers of myth and narrative.¹³ As radical as he was, Brower worked *within the system* rather than against it. And although he spoke of his refusal to compromise, he realized both that some compromises would be made and that he needed to convince others and mobilize them to his cause.

Conclusion: Narratives of Sustainable Flourishing

Where do these two case studies in ideology and utopia leave us with respect to our original question? As environmental crises loom larger, environmentalists rightly call for more and more immediate and radical change; however, the more immediate and radical the change, the less support is found amongst the general populace and the less likely such changes are to be politically feasible. I find this situation profoundly unsettling and challenging. However, while there are no easy answers for how to proceed, the preceding analysis has suggested some useful guidelines for shaping environmental discourse. Put into a single sentence it would read something like this: *Environmentalists should hold fast to a utopian vision of a sustainable future, articulated in compelling narratives, while remaining on alert for unconventional allies and unexpected opportunities for forwarding our agenda.*

It might be useful to begin by taking a page from David Brower, not because he is a perfect model—although we could certainly do worse and, in fact, have rarely done as well—but rather because he was so remarkably successful. Indeed, he was perhaps *the* most successful environmentalist this country has ever seen at combining a grassroots movement fueled by a genuinely utopian vision with a shrewd and pragmatic political sense. For Brower, the question was not “how radical?” (i.e., how radical should I be), but “radical, how?” (i.e., given that I am a radical, how can I most effectively express that radicalism).

Brower argued that environmental activists should begin with a bold vision, a utopian pole around which a committed group will rally. “What has happened to boldness in defense of the Earth,” he wondered; “environmentalists are so

13. See, for example, Brower’s use of *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World* (Porter 1962), *Lost and Found Again* (a movie about the Colorado River and Glen Canyon), and his advertisements in the *New York Times* comparing a dam in the Grand Canyon to “flooding the Sistine Chapel so tourists could get nearer to the ceiling” and calling for an “Earth National Park” (the latter advertisement precipitated the crisis that cost Brower his position with the Sierra Club). In addition, we should not discount Brower’s willingness, revolutionary at the time, to lobby in Washington D.C.

eager to appear reasonable that they have gone soft” (Brower 2000, 24, 25).

If you start worrying from the outset about pleasing too much or offending certain people or certain groups, then you’re already lost. You’ve got to let people know you are not going to sell out, that you are not going to waffle on the basic principles. You can say, “I haven’t reached all my conclusions yet; I may not be all that practical. But this is the way I think it ought to be, and we stand for that.” Then see who joins and what happens. (180)

Of course, all this is not to deny that utopian visions must, ultimately, contend with political realities. As we saw above, Brower had a keen appreciation for both the need for a passionate and idealistic grassroots movement and the need for effective political maneuvering. After asserting the utopian core of environmentalism he concedes that “in engineering long-term change, patience is important, lest fear scare off our natural allies. We have a large potential constituency: those who like to eat and breathe well” (49).¹⁴ However, while navigating the corridors of power, forming political coalitions, and crafting alliances we should always remember that “politicians are like weather vanes. Our job is to make the wind blow” (27).

How, today, are we to make the wind blow on large problems like climate change? The way we most often try to influence the political weather is to make rational arguments based on climate science or economics and grounded in statistics and scientific data.¹⁵ This strategy is important; however, as we noted, people are rarely the rational actors of classical economic theory. Therefore, while these traditional arguments are essential and should not be abandoned, they should be supplemented with the sort of “creative myth-making” encouraged by Schellenberger and Nordhaus and employed by Brower. This second, narrative approach should be multipronged, focused on sustainability, and aspirational.

First, the narrative approach will, perforce, be a multi-pronged effort. No one vision or narrative is likely to capture everyone’s imagination, at least in the near term. Therefore, in each case, environmentalists need to assess their audience. Too often environmentalists, especially “radical” environmentalists, preach mainly to the choir. Or, if they do step outside this discourse, it is to demean their opponents with AM talk-show rhetoric. This is a recipe for burning bridges, destroying potentially useful alliances, and alienating potential converts. We must remember that when people think of environmental “radicalism,” a fair number of them think of Greenpeace or the Sierra Club (or, if they have heard of them, 350.org or the Alliance for Climate Protection), not

14. Admittedly, some issues, among them climate change, may not give us the luxury of patience.

15. Another indispensable part of the answer is that we need to shift the political wind by becoming much more vocal and engaged in environmental politics. On this point, see Treanor (2010).

Jack Turner, Edward Abby, or Doug Peacock, and certainly not Earth First! or E.L.F. Many people are still environmental skeptics, and many more are well-meaning but relatively uneducated and uncommitted environmentalists. They think compact fluorescent light bulbs and canvas shopping bags are meaningful sacrifices for the environment, and their personal consumption is dictated by economic rather than philosophical limits; their concern is how much they *can* consume rather than how much they *ought to* consume. Most of the people we need to reach have not read *Walden*; they have not even heard of *Silent Spring*, *A Sand County Almanac* or *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. We have to speak to these people with narratives they find compelling in order to be effective.

In order to do so we need to avoid the temptation to construct a single narrative that will be big enough to draw everyone into the tent. In trying to find an account that will appeal to everyone, we are likely to paint a picture that will inspire no one. Rather, we should opt for multiple narratives that, while different, are complimentary. Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, Rachel Carson, Michael Pollan, Carlo Petrini, Jack Turner, David Brower, and Bill McKibben are all telling very different stories, and while these different narratives may *all* appeal to some people (usually members of the aforementioned choir), other people will find certain narratives compelling and others uninspiring, even off-putting. Doesn't it make sense to appeal to farmers in the rural South with Wendell Barry rather than Thoreau? Won't many urban and sub-urban professionals find Pollan and Petrini more compelling than Turner? In any case, environmentalists themselves are unlikely to rally around a single narrative of the good (and sustainable) life; therefore, it makes sense to cast multiple narrative nets and capitalize on the overlap in these different environmental narratives.

Much of this overlap becomes visible in light of the second important aspect of the narrative approach: the focus on sustainability. On the face of it, Carlo Petrini's Slow Food movement and Bill McKibben's 350 organization have little in common. The former organization is concerned with "good, clean, fair" food and the latter with reducing the levels of CO₂ in the Earth's atmosphere to 350 parts per million. However, it doesn't require an extraordinary leap of imagination to see the ways in which Slow Food and 350 have common cause on a number of issues. Local economies and sustainable agriculture support the goals of both organizations and are aligned with the goals of a variety of other environmental organizations. In pursuing the various paths of the multi-pronged narrative approach, will we eventually run up against antagonistic, even incompatible, narratives? Surely. However, there is so much overlap to be found that narratives allied around a vision of a sustainable future, even somewhat different versions of a sustainable future, can make great strides before they have to part ways, if indeed they do.

We need to build on the fact that, as Brower said, people want to live and fare well. There is a great deal of low-hanging fruit to be picked through illustrating the simple fact that the very things we need to do in order to solve

our environmental crises are quite often the very things we should want to do in any case if we desire to flourish. Take, for example, the issue of America's car culture. Rather than (or, really, in addition to) arguing that people cannot live in far-flung suburbs that necessitate a twice-daily one-hour commute, it might be more effective to point out that no sane person *wants* to spend two hours a day in an automobile.¹⁶ Ultimately, we will have to implement stricter CAFE standards, change zoning laws and city planning, subsidize public transportation and tax gasoline, and undertake other "coercive" measures in order to help encourage the kinds of behaviors that are environmentally necessary (e.g., less driving in personal automobiles); however, we can drum up support for those social goals by helping people to realize that they don't really want to spend so much time driving. How can we accomplish this? By articulating a vision of what life and society could be like, articulating it in various narratives, and comparing it to the sorts of lives and social organizations we have now. Study after study shows that people want desperately to step off the "hedonic treadmill" of materialism and the status race, that they want safer and more cohesive communities, and that they value a clean and sustainable environment.¹⁷ We only need to remind them of this and to convince them these things are possible.

Finally, the narrative approach should be an aspirational one, concerned with *who we hope to be* rather than *what we fear will happen*. We can find good reason for fear in the facts and statistics laid out in standard environmental arguments. However, while the doomsday statistics associated with the worst-case scenarios of global climate in 2100 may induce some people to action based on a fear of what may happen, they are just as likely to induce skepticism based on the "uncertainty" (i.e., variability) of the predictions, resignation based on the enormity of the problem (i.e., what can one person do?), or apathy based on the relatively long time-line (i.e., I certainly will not be alive in 2100, and who knows what technology they will have to combat the effects of climate change). We need to supplement the statistics of fear with narratives of hope. Once one becomes familiar with the science of climate change and the political and economic obstacles to taking that science seriously, it is easy to slip into apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives when imagining our future, but this is precisely what we have to avoid. I'm *not* suggesting that we sugarcoat or distort the disturbing facts in any way. However, if our environmental narratives resemble a page from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, people will be inspired to build bunkers, hoard food, and purchase firearms. If we look at those same facts and frame our environmental narratives in the language of

16. Which, given a fifty-week work year would be 500 hours a year. If that held true for a full adult work life from, say twenty-five to seventy years of age, the total would be 25,000 hours spent commuting, or almost *three years* of life (or, assuming one sleeps eight hours a day, 4.3 years of one's waking life). Who, on her deathbed, would not want those years back for more time with her family, or a favorite pastime?

17. See, for example, Laynard (2005), and de Graff, Wann, and Naylor (2002).

Bill McKibben's *Deep Economy*, people will be inspired to live more locally and, consequently, more lightly on the Earth.

A substantial number of people are suspicious of climate science, and no one is going to make substantial sacrifices to her lifestyle on the basis of suspicious science. One logical course of action is to try to convince people not to be suspicious of the science; however, a parallel course would be to convince them that they are not being asked to sacrifice.¹⁸ Although one might think that clarifying the science is the easier, more rational argument to make, *pace* Kant, few of our decisions are made on the basis of pure rationality. Convincing someone of the science will not change her mind about the sacrificial, and therefore odious, nature of the relevant renunciations (even if she supports them as necessary); but, paradoxically, convincing someone that at least some of the suggested changes are not sacrifices but are, in fact, desirable may well make her more willing to accept the science. This is why we ought to heed Brower's advice about the power of utopian vision, expressed, as Schellenberger and Nordhaus suggest, in a comprehensive narrative of the good life. True, it will be necessary to engage in horse-trading to accomplish our goals. True, we will need allies with whom we will likely need to compromise in order to form alliances. True, we may not achieve the full measure of our utopian vision, and we will certainly not achieve it all in one fell swoop. However, we should not begin by asking what compromises will be necessary, but by insisting on how

18. Not that sacrifice is, in itself, bad. Once people are convinced of the science, the rhetoric of sacrifice can become incredibly effective. And this is a good thing, because some real sacrifices will be necessary to forestall or avoid climate change. People are often more than willing to sacrifice in order to achieve a noble goal. Witness the so-called "greatest generation," members of which sacrificed themselves willingly not only on the beaches of Normandy, but also on the "home front" by rationing gas and steel, planting "victory gardens," etc. Although they emphasize sacrifice rather than flourishing—and sometimes make use of rhetoric that seems inappropriate today—the WWII era campaigns to promote carpooling ("When you ride alone you ride with Hitler") and home gardening ("Plant a Victory Garden. Our Food is Fighting; a Garden will Make your Rations Go Further") offer useful examples of ways in which advertising might impact social behaviors. Our media and information-saturated society provides us with almost unlimited possibilities for launching such campaigns to shift the cultural imaginary toward the utopian environmental pole. What are the possibilities for using the media to convince others that living more simply is *preferable*, regardless of environmental necessity? Conversely, how can we use the media to shift cultural norms so that there is a significant *stigma* attached to driving alone, wasting food, and other blatantly unsustainable practices? Imagine a society where people react to solitary drivers of SUVs the way we currently react to other people who behave in exceptionally distasteful, if technically legal, ways (e.g., people who treat their pets poorly or who are low-grade bigots).

things *should* be. Although we should not be held captive by our utopianism, we should not be embarrassed by it.¹⁹

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19. In this vein, see Lipow (2009): "Mainstream environmentalists who take the position that the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill 'could be worse' help ensure that it will be. Publicly proclaiming willingness to live with the bill in its current form gives nobody any leverage to strengthen it."

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