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One World or Two?

The world's largest conservation organization, the World Wildlife Fund, found a novel way to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary in September 1986. It brought together, at the small Italian town of Assisi, representatives of five of the world's great religions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. Assisi is the birthplace of Saint Francis (1181–1226), the activist friar who was a lover of the poor and of nature, a precociously early environmentalist recognized by a papal bull of 1979 as the 'patron saint' of ecology. Now, some 650 years after his death, a congregation of spiritual leaders gathered at his basilica for a Religion and Nature Inter-Faith Ceremony to 'celebrate the dignity of nature and the duty of every person to live harmoniously within the natural world.' The ceremony started with sermons by leaders of the five faiths, explaining how their religious tradition could, and would, cope with the challenges of environmental degradation. These speeches were, in each case, accompanied by more evocative aspects of liturgy: Christian hymns, Buddhist chants, and Hindu temple dances. Time was also set aside for a ceremony of Repentance, where the seers asked forgiveness for harm that they or their fellow faithful had inflicted on nature.

The speakers at Assisi ranked high in the hierarchy of their faiths. They included an abbot of an ancient Buddhist shrine in north-eastern India, acting here as the personal representative of the Dalai Lama; the Minister-General of a leading Franciscan order; the Secretary-General of the Muslim World League; and the Vice-President of the World Jewish Congress. Also present were some powerful people from the secular world, such as the Italian Minister of the Environment, and Prince Philip, husband of the Queen of England and a

long-time patron of the WWF. Lis Harris, covering the event for the *New Yorker*, wrote that the organizers hoped to 'communicate the conservation message of the events in Assisi to the entire global network of local priests, mullahs, rabbis, lamas, and swamis who had intimate contact with that vast segment of the population which neither read papers nor watched television nor subscribed to magazines . . .' The idea behind the ecumenical service in Assisi was thus to harness these diverse and widespread energies towards a single collective goal: the protection of the One Earth which is the abode for us all.

By the 1970s, as this book has shown, environmentalism had emerged as a worldwide movement, with its chapters and outposts in all continents. In country after country, individuals and groups made manifest their concern at the deterioration of the environment in their own village, town, district, or province. By the 1980s, however, to these local and regional problems had been added a new class of problems that could only be described as global. These included the build up of carbon dioxide and other gases in the atmosphere, the so-called greenhouse effect; the hole in the ozone layer noticed over Anatartica, caused primarily by the emissions of chlorofluorocarbons or CFCs; and the rapid decline of biological diversity through the extinction of countless species of plants, insects and animals, and sometimes of the very habitats in which they had dwelt. These were considered to be global problems in so far as the terrain where they occured was property that could be claimed by everyone or by no one. They were global also in that no nation was so fortunate as to be insulated from their effects. With regard to the change in world climate or the loss of biological diversity, there was no telling, yet, which country would suffer first or suffer most.

The sentiment that there was only one world to share, or lose, was heightened by the pictures of the earth that started coming in from outer space. On the ground the earth's expanse seemed limitless; as did its capacity to sustain an infinite increase of human appetites and demands. But from the satelite the earth suddenly appeared vulnerable and fragile: a part of the universe small in itself but with a especial resonance for those who happened to live on it. The astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who flew aboard the spaceship Apollo 14, saw the planet as 'a sparkling blue-and-white jewel' which seemed 'like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery.'

In the first week of 1989, the popular newsmagazine *Time* authoritatively underwrote this emergence of a global environmental consciousness. It chose the earth as the 'Planet of the Year:' this was

a striking departure from its usual practice of nominating a statesman, scientist, sportsman or rock star as its 'Man of the Year.' In his lead article, Thomas A. Sancton offered a listing of the previous year's environmental disasters—dust bowls, heatwaves, floods, species gone extinct, etc.—noting that

> Everyone suddenly sensed that this gyrating globe, this precious repository of all the life that we knew of, was in danger. No single individual, no event, no movement captured imaginations or dominated headlines more than the clump of rock and soil and water and air that is our common home.

Sancton quoted several respected American scientists in support of the view that 'both the causes and effects of the [environmental] problems that threaten the earth are global, and they must be attacked globally.' He then ended with a stirring exhortation of his own:

> Every individual on the planet must be made aware of its vulnerability and of the urgent need to preserve it. No attempt to protect the environment will be successful in the long run unless ordinary people—the California housewife, the Mexican peasant, the Soviet factory worker, the Chinese farmer—are willing to adjust their life-styles. Our wasteful, careless ways must become a thing of the past. We must recycle more, procreate less, turn off lights, use mass transit, do a thousand things differently in our everyday lives. . . . Now, more than ever, the world needs leaders who can inspire their fellow citizens with a fiery sense of mission, not a nationalistic or military campaign but a universal crusade to save the planet.

II

The convention at Assisi and the *Time* story both stressed the shared interest of all peoples in combating environmental stress. The newsmagazine approvingly quoted the Missouri botanist Peter Raven: '*All* nations are tied together as to their common fate. We are all facing a common problem, which is, how are we going to keep this single resource we have, namely the world, viable?' The priests and mullahs gathered at the WWF gathering would have endorsed this statement, only substituting 'religions' for 'nations.'

Possibly the first scientists to use this image of a common earth were Barbara Ward and René Dubos, one a London-based economist, the other a New York microbiologist, who together wrote a book for the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. Their study was called *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*, and the last line of its

introduction read: 'As we enter the global phase of human evolution it becomes obvious that each man has two countries, his own and the planet Earth.' This idea of a small, shared earth has provided the *raison d'etre* for the United Nations' continuing efforts to bring about international co-operation in the environmental field. In 1987, for example, it issued an influential report on sustainable development called *Our Common Future*, written by a transnational committee chaired by the Norwegian Prime Minister, Go Harlem Brundtland.

Following the Brundtland Report came the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, known by the acronym UNCED. The UNCED was held at Rio De Janeiro in June 1992, as a somewhat delayed follow-up to the Stockholm meeting of twenty years earlier. One hundred and eighty countries participated in this 'Earth Summit;' represented in many cases by their heads of state. Alongside the official conference was held a parallel meeting of non-governmental organizations or NGOs, featuring talks and panel discussions by some of the best-known environmental activists of the globe. The Earth Summit was very likely the largest international conference ever held, and indisputably one of the most controversial. Where the spiritualists at Assisi and the scientists polled by *Time* magazine comfortably agreed on a 'common future,' the arguments at Rio suggested that while there might be one world, it was divided into two unequal halves.

The three major global problems discussed at Rio were deforestation, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity. UNCED had hoped that for each of these an inter-governmental treaty would be ratified by the participating nations. Draft treaties had already been circulated and discussed at a series of preparatory meetings in 1990 and 1991. At these 'prepcoms' two broad and generally opposing camps had emerged, whose disagreements spilled over into the discussions in June 1992. On the one side were placed the industrialized and mainly affluent countries of the North; on the other, the industrializing and mostly still-poor countries of the South.

The question of climate change emerged as the most contentious of all. To check the build up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, it was at first recommended that each country agree to stabilizing its carbon emissions by an agreed cut-off date, say 2015. This proposal, advanced by the Washington-based World Resources Institute (WRI), was bitterly attacked by Southern environmentalists. Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, of the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, made a radical distinction between the 'survival emissions' of the poor and the 'luxury emissions' of the rich. They wondered how

the WRI could 'equate the carbon dioxide contributions of gas guzzling automobiles in Europe and North America or, for that matter, anywhere in the Third World with the methane emissions of draught cattle and rice fields of subsistence farmers in West Bengal or Thailand?' It was known that the oceans and forests of the globe had a strictly limited capacity to absorb emissions, constituting as it were a 'carbon sink.' It was suggested that if there was now a dangerously high build-up of gases incapable of absorption, then the corrective action had first to come from the North. For if one were to allocate equal shares of the atmosphere to all living human beings, it was apparent that the North had more than used up its share of the 'sink,' whereas the emissions in countries like China and India were well within the limits of the share of the sink that was rightfully theirs.

At Rio was also circulated a forest convention which sought to strengthen global control over forest resources. Where Northern environmentalists wanted an international management regime to faciliate the growing of forests to serve as additional carbon sinks, their Southern counterparts insisted that national control must rather make way for local control, for forests were above all a community resource providing vital inputs for the survival of millions of forest dwellers in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A statement issued by activists from twelve Southern countries sharply asked why, if forests needed to be put under a system of global governance, natural resources coveted and controlled by the North should not be subject to the same. 'If forest management is of global consequence,' it asked, 'so is the management of the world's oil resources. Are we going to have a global oil convention for sustainable production, management and conservation of the world's oil resources?'

Dispute also ranged over a proposed biodiversity treaty, thought by Southern activists to be unduly biased in favor of Northern biotechnology companies. The draft treaty had not allowed for just compensation to be paid to the indigenous knowledge of local communities: knowledge that has in the past been used without payment, or even without acknowledgement, in the development of new and lucrative varieties of crops and medicinal drugs.

The Malaysian green activist Martin Khor Kok Peng has pointed out that UNCED seemed unable or unwilling to face up to two central questions: the fair assignation of responsibility for the degradation that had already taken place, and the extent to which the United Nations and other international fora really allowed an equal voice to all nations of the world. Many environmentalists, not all from the South,

insisted that 'all available evidence shows that the environmental crisis has been precipitated almost exclusively by the wasteful and excessive consumption in the North. Indeed, roughly 80 percent of the resources of the planet as well as its sinks are being utilized by the 20 per cent of the population that lives in Europe, North America, Oceania and Japan.' Population growth in the Third World is sometimes held to be the prime cause of environmental degradation, but as the British writer Fred Pearce asked, 'Why is it that Western environmentalists worry so much about population growth in poor countries when each new child born in North America or Europe will consume 10 or 100 times as much of the world's resources and contribute many times as much pollution? A three-child American family is, in logic, many more times as dangerous to the planet than an eight- (or even an eighty-) child African family.'

To better understand the disputes at Rio, one needs to focus as much on the components as on the extent of this consumption. A prime contributor of chlorofluorocarbons are refrigerators; a prime contributor of greenhouse gases the emissions of automobiles. The possession of a car and a fridge have come to be regarded as the index of progress, of prosperity, sometimes of civilization itself. But the truth of the matter is that virtually all Americans, Japanese, Norwegians and Belgians already own a car and a fridge, whereas most Indians, Kenyans, Colombians and Rwandans don't, but *aspire to do so in the not-so-distant future*. To ask the countries of the South to 'cap' their emissions of CFCs and CO_2 is to deny to much of humanity the hope of ever possessing well-recognized artefacts of comfort and well-being such as automobiles and refrigerators.

In this respect the California housewife and Mexican peasant certainly do not share a common past or present—on what terms can they then come to share a common future? Only in a world where their voices carry equal weight, where there is put in place a genuinely participatory democracy at the global level. But as the Centre for Science and Environment complained in a 'Statement on Global Democracy' issued specially for the Earth Summit:

> There is no effort [at present] to create new levels of power that would allow all citizens of the world to participate in global environmental management. Today, the reality is that Northern governments and institutions can, using their economic and political power, intervene in, say, Bangladesh's development. But no Bangladeshi can intervene in the development processes of Northern economies even if global warming caused largely by Northern emissions may submerge half [their] country.

III

A thoughtful account of the divisions before and during the Earth Summit has been provided by the Pakistani sociologist Tariq Banuri. Differences between North and South, he suggests, were both conflicts based on economic interests and conflicts over meanings. The same event was thus viewed very differently, 'as though people sitting in the same theatre were to be seeing two different movies.' 'Where most Northerners,' remarked Banuri—

> see UNCED as the very welcome unfolding of collective action to save humanity, many southerners, government functionaries as well as NGO activists (albeit for different reasons) fear in it the emergence of a new imperialism, of new conditionalities, and of new obstacles to the alleviation of poverty and oppression. Northerners have lined up to take part in a movie of Noah building an ark to defend us against the deluge. But the south does not seem to belong in this story; it is in a theatre on the other side of the railroad tracks, where Jesus is being crucified to save humanity, where the poor have to suffer in their poverty so that the rich can enjoy their lifestyle.

In this context, one cannot but notice a vivid contrast between the 1986 meeting of religious leaders and the meeting of nations at Rio held six years later. The first was well-meaning and consensual, but also bombastic and vague, talking platitudinously of a shared responsibility mandated by all our faiths. The second was bitter and conflictual, but also concrete and precise, estimating culpability according to extent of emissions and arguing about each country's share of the biosphere.

This book has underlined the sheer variety of environmentalism, its rich and exuberant expression over the years and across the globe. In the past, as I have suggested, there have been distinct 'national' green traditions; but these have also creatively borrowed from one another. The battles of the Earth Summit seemed to presage another kind of encounter between environmentalists, one that might be destructive and disharmonious rather than mutually beneficial.

The residues of Rio will stay with us awhile, but beyond their real and basic differences there is something that unites different kinds of environmentalists. If there is indeed an idea that unites them, which brings together America's John Muir with India's Mahatma Gandhi, Kenya's Waangari Matthai with Germany's Petra Kelly, it is, I think, the idea of *restraint*. All through history those who have commanded power have shown a conspicuous disregard of limits on their behavior, whether toward the environment or towards other humans. Capitalists

have exploited workers, socialists have suppressed citizens, both have dominated nature in the belief that it cannot speak back. In their own belief, and often in their practice, Greens are marked rather by restraint: as manifest in the wonder and reverence with which the wilderness thinker looks upon the wild, or the gentleness with which the rural romantic caresses the land, or, indeed, the statistical means by which the scientific conservationist seeks to maintain nature's capital by using only the incremental growth to its stock.

A clue to what brings together all shades of green, all varieties of environmentalism, is contained also in a remark of the Indian Sinologist, Giri Deshingkar. Deshingkar once observed that modern civilization has divorced us both from the past and from the future. By undervaluing traditional knowledge and traditional institutions, it has severed our links with our forefathers and our grandmothers. At the same time, by focusing on individual achievement and the here and now, it has radically discounted the future. 'In the long run we are all dead,' claimed the British economist John Maynard Keynes, a statement that might very well be the epitaph of the twentieth century.

The philosophy of 'in the long run we are all dead' has guided economic development in the First and Third Worlds, in both socialist and capitalist countries. These processes of development have brought, in some areas and for some people, a genuine and substantial increase in human welfare. But they have also been marked by a profound insensitivity to the environment, a callous disregard for the needs of generations to come. They have also perpetuated and in some cases intensified the divisions within human society, between the consuming classes and the working classes. It is what we know as the 'global green movement' that has most insistently moved people and governments beyond this crippling shortsightedness, by struggling for a world where the tiger shall still roam the forests of the Sunderbans and the lion stalk majestically across the African plain, where the harvest of nature may be more justly distributed across the members of the human species, where our children might more freely drink the water of our rivers and breathe the air of our cities. It is in this sense that the environmental movement has shown us a common future—and the multiple paths to get to it.