

COMMUNICATION

The Missing Politics in Environmental Education, Revisited

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Abstract

Politics in environmental education is conspicuous by its absence. This article is a plea to make politics—the study of who gets what, when, and how—central to our field and the keystone of a better way forward.

Keywords: Education; politics; political economy; growth; climate change

“It’s very hard to see us fixing the climate until we fix our democracy.”

James Hansen

For all of our successes, and they are many, and for all of our considerable efforts, and they are admirable, humankind is losing the effort to save a decently habitable planet. The immediate causes include rapid climate destabilisation, ocean acidification and the loss of biodiversity all driven by the expanding human footprint. With determination and effort, some damage is repairable in a timescale that matters, but much of it is irreversible. As much as one wishes it were otherwise, it is not.

The reflections here are to my colleagues in environmental education who as Aldo Leopold (1953/1972) wrote “live alone in a world of wounds . . . that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise” (p.165). Since those words were written in the 1940s, we have done many good things, but they do not match the scope, scale and urgency of the challenges through the “long emergency” ahead. There are many reasons for this, beginning with the massive size, complexity and duration of the “polycrisis.” But most important is our tendency to overlook the fact that the use and disposition of land, air, water, forests, oceans, minerals, energy and atmosphere are inevitably political having to do with “who gets what when and how.” With a few notable exceptions, however, we avoided politics and giving offence in a highly polarised time but now things are fast coming undone and time for correction is very short.

Decades ago, we knew enough about the threats of rapid climate change, in particular, to head off the worst possibilities now becoming daily headlines. We failed to act, however, and the reasons owe to money from the oil, gas and coal interests funding denial, delay and distraction. The media, for the most part, were willing accomplices. Our collective capacity to protect air, water, land, biota, climate and health is further threatened by corporations whose interest run counter to the public good. The wealth of the top 1% grows while that of the bottom 50% recedes.

The causes of peace and justice languish, while those of militarism and violence expand. Greed, lies, megalomania and criminality infect our politics and social media now more than ever before. The institutions and norms of democracy and democratic governance are threatened, the common wealth is up for sale and a tsunami of lies and “dark” money threatens to drown the public interest.

None of this is particularly new and none of it accidental. It is rather the result of decades of effort to undermine democracy to the advantage of corporations and the wealthy. To do that, it was necessary to subvert venerable institutions, public language and our common understanding of facts and reality. Not to put too fine a point on recent history, it was a *coup* but without tanks in the streets or Colonels with dark glasses. How did it happen?

I

The short answer is that we were not paying attention. While we were writing brilliant articles and books, they were taking over school boards and city councils. While we were holding great conferences in beautiful places, they were taking over state legislatures and governor’s offices. While we were doing science, they were doing politics taking over Congress, the Senate, the court system and learning the arts of manipulation by television, radio, internet and social media. While we were growing school gardens and talking about exciting possibilities for renewable energy and ecological agriculture, they were steadily forcing our politics to the right and taking over the party of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt and Eisenhower. While we were getting in touch with our inner selves, they were staffing up on K Street. While we were trying to make peace with capitalism, they were at Davos advancing the cause of neoliberalism and working to make the rich much richer and the poor that much poorer. While we were trying to be bi-partisan, they were doing zero-sum politics, that is to say heads they win tails we lose. While we were most often right about the issues, they were taking power. While we were trying to be reasonable, they were cultivating and exploiting resentment. While we were reading Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, they were marinating in the bizarre philosophy of Ayn Rand. Most important, while we were doing our eco-thing, they were implementing Lewis Powell’s plan for a massive corporate counter attack against environmentalism and progressive movements. In the fevered politics of those turbulent years, his memo sparked creation of the organisations charged with legitimising and propagating the politics of a new era of Robber Barons and Social Darwinists.

Who are they? Whatever else they may be, they are not conservatives in the mold of Edmund Burke or Richard Weaver or even Barry Goldwater. Many are descendants of the far-right of American politics with roots in the South with its long history of opposition to the Federal government as a countervailing force to systems of racial discrimination and unbridled corporate power. Their agenda includes a hodge-podge of ideas such as “getting government off our backs” (but leaving predatory corporations there), ending Social Security, further enlarging the military, terminating a woman’s right to control her own body, eliminating environmental protections, defunding social programmes, ending restrictions on gun ownership, freedom from public obligations and always more tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. In other words, they don’t like government regulations, taxes, assertive women and minorities, national forests, public parks, the Postal Service, science, fact-checkers, the media, controls on gun ownership and, of course, “liberals.” They include neo-Nazis, white supremacists, internet trolls, tea-partiers, climate change deniers, extreme evangelicals, FOX news true believers, Limbaugh heirs “ditto-heads,” Ayn Rand libertarians, free market ideologues, MAGA cultists, and some well-heeled people who really ought to know better. Disproportionately, they’re angry white guys and their enablers who aren’t as angry but are adept opportunists who know how to make money from those who are. They are noisy, and increasingly well-organised. They are inclined to the kind of self-righteousness that justifies means by the unquestioned self-anointed holiness of the ends. Now they control what remains of the Republican Party that once stood for the kind of conservatism that included a

commitment to fiscal integrity, personal probity, a regard for facts, public decency, balanced budgets, common sense and the kind of patriotism that could cost you something. Donald Trump amplified and gave voice to their inchoate rage and created a world-class model of a kakistocracy, an ancient Greek word that means government run by the worst, least qualified and most unscrupulous. They are a minority but an intense, highly organised, well-funded and well-armed minority and sometimes that is all it takes to cause political havoc. On the eve of the Nazi takeover in 1933, for example, only 22% of Germans were members of the Nazi Party.

“We,” on the other hand, are mostly Democrats, liberals and self-described progressives dispersed across multiple overlapping issues. We don’t like polarisation or hard-ball politics, or say we don’t. We like to “get to yes” and cost-free “win-win” solutions. We listen to National Public Radio, get our news from MSNBC and *The New York Times*. We read publications like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*. We have college degrees. We are geographically confined to reservations in the Northeast and West Coast and a few urban enclaves and college towns in between. We are more likely to live in cities and work in professions. We talk at length about listening to “them” with greater empathy, feeling their pain, understanding where they’re coming from, etc. As things get hotter, we prefer “happy talk” and the kind of optimism that depends on breakthrough technologies, not social and political improvement. Often, we are boring, pedantic and long-winded. We talk in footnotes and are a poor match for those who regurgitate well-rehearsed talking points delivered early each morning by a disciplined media machine.

Nonetheless, we can be very proud of the intellectual capital and knowledge we progressive environmentalists built over many decades. We wrote good books on environmental education, sustainability, justice, environmental economics, renewable energy, climate change, sustainable agriculture and greening cities. Our analysis of complex policy issues was spot on. In a rational country, we would be winning in a landslide. Alas, history and human nature are seldom so simple. The spoils go to the winners, not always to those who were merely right about the issues. “They” now hold much of the power that runs the country, including the Supreme Court, and is running it into the ground. They control policies affecting taxing and spending, health care, regulation, banks, the distribution of wealth, education, public health, military spending, war and peace, media, law enforcement and the environment that are destroying the foundations of democracy and more. With a few exceptions, they are proudly ignorant of ecology and Earth systems science.

This is a slight caricature, but only slightly. The line separating “us” from “them” is admittedly blurry and so I will qualify my words. Sometimes people change their opinions, reason breaks through the fog of ideology and sinners repent. Sometimes it is possible to find the Holy Grail of common ground, and there are conversions on the road to Damascus. Sometimes people backslide to a more reasonable place, but mostly people cling to their opinions and narratives like shipwrecked sailors on the high seas cling to flotsam.

On the other side, some of us have worked on political campaigns and have taken on issues like climate change, but our hearts are in building green schools, designing cool cities and creating models of a future with organic gardens and regenerative farms. All good and necessary things. We aimed to be decent and accommodating, while mostly avoiding the hard work of political organising, spending time down at the truck stop, local politics and the messy issues of governance and politics. In other words, we did the non-controversial bottom up things, but they seized the commanding heights of power and wealth.

II

The dominant fact of our time is the rapid decline in the vital signs of earth and the growing possibility of cascading system failures threatening basic necessities like food supply and electricity

and more (Sengupta, 2018; Copernicus, 2024; Steffen et al., 2018). The question is what we can do to improve the human prospect, not just lament our peril. The overriding fact is that we know more about the science of ecology than we do about the implications it poses for governance, law and policy. As a result, we do not yet know how to translate ecology and earth systems science into laws, regulations, public institutions and economic arrangements with the resilience and durability necessary for human survival over the long haul. The upshot is that any adequate response to our predicament must begin with an understanding of political economy large enough to include ecology and earth systems science and the organisational capacity to make it mainstream.¹

My point is environmental issues, from local to global, are unavoidably political, having to do with “who gets what, when, and how.” The “who” includes all of those qualified as citizens, including those unborn and excluded from our moral community. “What” includes everything taken from nature that is transformed into wealth and the ecological processes that recycle the resulting waste or consign it to land, oceans and atmosphere. The “how” of politics are the rules that govern inclusion, exclusion, political processes and the allocation of power. There is no logical way for anyone to be apolitical. To the extent that we stand aloof from politics, we give tacit assent to the forces that are destroying the habitability of the earth. The conclusion is straightforward: politics, policy and political philosophy are at the core of environmentalism. Otherwise, we are adrift in the political turmoil that is engulfing the world and impairing our common future. In other words, we do not have an environmental crisis as much as a political crisis that is the sum total of our failures of foresight, empathy and morality in the conduct of our public business. We do not yet understand what kind of political changes will be necessary to calibrate human institutions and behaviour with the earth’s systems and processes to advance the causes of justice, fairness, security for all, decency and the hard-won gains of civilisation. Whatever arrangements we make, however, we must reckon with five fundamental challenges.

The first has to do with governance. The emergence of environmental law and regulation in the years from 1969 to 1980 presaged the dawn of a new beginning between humankind and the natural world. The signal accomplishments included the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), creation of the Council on Environmental Quality, the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, the Wilderness Protection Act, Endangered Species Act, the Scenic and Wild Rivers Act and by executive order, formation of the Environmental Protection Agency. These achievements reflected a consensus among Democrats and Republicans that created the legal foundation for present-day environmental policy in the U.S. that is now under assault.

As important as they were, however, environmental laws and regulations of that era left much undone. They did not confront larger issues such as climate change, energy policy, land use, technological change and the overall scale of the economy which were left to the market. But the goal to grow the economy on one hand conflicts with protecting the environment on the other. The Environmental Protection Agency has no statutory authority to resolve those competing ends. Since the abolition of the Office of Technology Assessment in 1994, we have had little Federal capacity to foresee technological problems — equivalent to turning headlights off on a dark night while travelling at a high rate of speed on a winding road. Environmental regulation, such as it is, occurs under the commerce clause of the Constitution — an awkward arrangement at best. Moreover, deeper issues having to do with the recalibration of governance with the holistic and long-term ecological systems that require foresight and a systems thinking were left unresolved in the ongoing conflict between public and private rights. It is not clear whether or how a democratic society might resolve such issues.

¹Perhaps like the Mont Pèlerin Society formed by Frederick Hayek, Milton Friedman and others in advancing the cause of neoliberalism in the decades after World War II . . . only better thought out, much faster and more inclusive. See, Philip Mirowski & Dieter Plehwe (eds), *The Road From Mont Pelerin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009/2015; Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

The second challenge, then, has to do with the viability of democracy (Orr, 2020, 2023). We simply do not know whether democracy as practiced today can rise to the challenge of protecting and restoring the ecosphere.² Biologist Garrett Hardin (1968), had his doubts. In a famous essay in *Science* he wrote that the only way to avoid tragedy in the use of common property resources was “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.” Economist Robert Heilbroner (1974/1980) in *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* arrived at the same conclusion, writing: “I not only predict but I prescribe a centralisation of power as the only means by which our threatened and dangerous civilisation will make way for its successor” (p. 175).

Political scientist William Ophuls (1977/1992) in *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity* argued that the capacity of earth to supply resources and process our wastes is constrained by what he called “ecological scarcity” (p. 200) by which he meant the sum total of all environmental limits. From that perspective, he drew conclusions about politics and governance similar to those of Hardin and Heilbroner. “Democracy as we know it,” he wrote, “cannot conceivably survive [because] ecological scarcity . . . engender(s) overwhelming pressures toward political systems that are frankly authoritarian” (p. 216). The problem of democracy is the incompatibility of the freedom “to behave in a selfish, greedy, and quarrelsome fashion” (p. 216) and the imperative to discipline our appetites in order to avoid ecological scarcity. The epigraph to his book, taken from a letter written by Edmund Burke in 1791, summarises our predicament:

men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites . . . society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without . . . men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters. (p. 216)

Burke’s conservatism required a kind of forbearance alien to citizens in mass consumption societies conditioned by a century of sophisticated advertising to be dependable and dependent consumers always yearning for more. Well-conditioned consumers, however, are not likely to go quietly into the night of ecological frugality and self-denial.

The **third challenge** has to do with the physical limits of the growth economy. The fact is that we have never been as rich as we assumed because we off-loaded costs and risks on others in some distant place or on future generations in the form of resource scarcity, toxicity, biotic impoverishment, climate instability, conflict, poverty, disease and wrecked lives. The extractive industries have been highly profitable mostly to the extent they did not pay the full costs for the damage they inflicted. The larger point is that, sooner or later, the laws of entropy will bring economic growth to an end. We cannot know exactly how it will occur or whether it will occur by choice or by necessity, but we do know that when it does it will threaten social stability in direct proportion to the inequality of distribution and the accumulation of past grievances. We could pretend otherwise as long as enough people believed the myth that a rising tide would lift their particular boat. When the economy shudders to a halt and the faith in the miracle of endless economic growth evaporates, however, inequality will drive resentment, things will come undone,

²The future of democracy has always been in question. Among its critics, Plato regarded it a prelude to tyranny. Aristotle was not much more sanguine. The founding fathers of our Republic were wary of it. John Adams believed that democracies always end by committing suicide. James Madison believed that with luck democracy in America might last a century. English writer E. M. Forster could give it only two cheers, H. L. Mencken none at all, believing people incorrigibly stupid. Economist Joseph Schumpeter likewise thought voters became dumber when they entered the political arena. Robert Dahl, perhaps the greatest student of democracy in the 20th century once described himself as a “pessimist” about its future. Winston Churchill captured our predicament in his often-quoted observation that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others ever tried. In short, democracy is everywhere and always a wager that enough people would know enough, care enough and be wise enough to participate honourably and well in the conduct of the public business.

and the pitchforks will come out. In short, “There are limits and we are up against them” (Kolbert, 2022, p. 47).

Unless, that is, technological developments allow us to make an end run around ecological scarcity and keep the party going, which raises a **fourth challenge**. The prospect of technological breakthroughs that create jobs, surmount ecological limits, cycle all wastes back into “food” and otherwise allow us to ignore growing income disparities. Salvation by superior gadgetry and better design requires no messy politics and reckoning with unsolvable dilemmas. Its acolytes see only problems solvable with more research and smarter policy. Technology, however, has its own unanticipated effects and sometime it “bites back.” But it arrives as wonders and miracles, only later do we discover a darker side. Smart phones, for example, useful for communicating and providing access to information, also surveil, manipulate and addict. Starting as idealistic enterprises aiming to “do no evil,” companies such as Facebook, Amazon and Google morphed into something different dedicated to moving fast and breaking things, devil and internet trolls take the hindmost. The idealism of founders gave way to profit-making, the temptations of power and the unanticipated effects of complex systems operating in the dark beyond a manageable scale. If we have a philosophy of technology, it is more akin to cheerleading or just resignation to the inevitable, rather than to critical thinking and careful public policy beginning with the question “what else does it do?” The fact is that we do not buy a device alone. Rather we buy into a larger system that includes extractive industries, production facilities, a history of exploitation and pollution, effects on human health and social cohesion, land use, politics, lobbyists, political power, biodiversity and the effects of addiction. Further, we are at the threshold of “super-intelligence” systems that will be vastly more intelligent than humans in ways that we are not likely to comprehend until too late if then. The advent of a dangerous new era is coming and it is entirely possible that humans will be displaced by artificial intelligence that will regard us as a stupid and disposable inconvenience.

A **final** challenge. In a world of limits and extreme poverty, should we restrain the accumulation of wealth? Said differently, do Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk deserve to be gadzillionaires? Can we afford them? Free marketeers say, yes! But the case for inequality without limits is increasingly shabby. The idea that greed is good, in Ingrid Robeyns words, is “wreaking so much havoc. That we have come to believe and enact [it] is shameful, and . . . destructive” (Robeyns, 2024, p. 228). The upshot is that setting a floor and ceiling to the accumulation of wealth is the keystone issue in the struggle toward a durable, decent, peaceful and democratic society.

III

Sitting quietly in the ruins of the Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg, Germany, one can almost hear the echoes of Adolf Hitler’s carefully staged harangues and the responding shouts of a hundred thousand fanatical followers who were about to be fed into the maw of World War II. It all seems so distant and yet so current. How did the Germany of Kant and Goethe descend to that of Hitler and Himmler? How did great universities and scientific institutions succumb to Nazism? Where was the resistance from political leaders, churches, unions, press and civic organisations? The transformation happened quickly, mostly between 1928 and 1934, nearly ninety years ago but the infection has not died out.

Erika Mann (1938), in *School for Barbarians* identified education as the key to the process by which the mind and language of a nation was subverted. “The Führer’s best bet lay,” she wrote, “from the very beginning, in the inexperience and easy credulity of youth. It was his ambition, as it must be any dictator’s, to take possession of that most fertile field for dictators: the country’s youth . . . All the power of the regime — all its cunning, its entire machine of propaganda and discipline — is directed to emphasise the programme for German children” (p. 19–20). The deflection of the mind and loyalties of a nation cannot be quickly undone. In the midst of the ruins of 1945 as the

war was ending, historian and philologist, Victor Klemperer (1957/2013), described an encounter with a former student of his who said: “I still believe in HIM (Hitler), I really do” (p. 122).

Our situation differs from that in Germany in the decades from the 1920s to 1945, but there are similarities as well. Yale historian Timothy Snyder (2015) argues, for example, that Hitler’s drive for lebensraum in Eastern Europe was an early version of the geopolitics of ecological scarcity and so a warning to us. The political immune system necessary to counter ignorance, fanaticism, gullibility, fear, misogyny, racism and violence, begins early on in classrooms where the young learn the basics rules of democracy: critical thinking, honesty, fairness, empathy, non-violence and citizenship. None of this comes easily or naturally. Youth must be educated to be citizens of a democracy and to know the costs of careless and indifferent citizenship. They must also learn to see themselves as citizens of the community of life. As citizens of a democracy, they must understand the intimate relationship between democracy, human rights, dignity, justice, peace and the human prospect and so must become knowledgeable about history, politics, the law and the workings of government. As citizens in the ecological community, they must understand ecology, natural cycles and the web of life. As dual citizens of human and natural communities they must learn to value of the wider community and the common good that joins the interests of both. They must understand the intimate and reciprocal relationship between our politics and our ecological prospects.

Further, like those of Germany in the 1930s, schools, colleges and universities, are under attack by those who would subvert their purposes and narrow the focus to those subjects and curriculum useful for jobs and careers in a growth-oriented economy and so non-threatening to the power of banks, corporations and oligarchy. We must resist the temptation to shrink our courses and curriculum in order to avoid controversial subjects. We must continue to teach connection and connectedness between peoples, humans and nature, our past and our future.

Environmentalism heretofore, has been about everything but the politics that got us into our predicament and might yet be the path out of it. Our education, generally, and that pertaining to the environment in particular has mostly excluded civics and the role of politics and governance in our predicament. Often we did so to avoid controversy and the charge of partisan bias. In doing so, however, we were also being political — in effect supporting the status quo and the forces that prefer a passive and ecologically illiterate public; consumers not citizens. Alas, there is no way to be apolitical or non-political. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words, there is no such thing as “cheap grace.”

The upshot is this. The convergence of rapid climate destabilisation and disintegrating democratic institutions is the historical context for our work. I think it unlikely, as stated in the epigraph, that we will stabilise the climate without first repairing and strengthening democratic institutions. In both cases, the time for remedy is very short. We should help our students become “radical professionals,” people of irrepressible courage, creativity, joy and humility dedicated to the causes of life, justice, truth, decency and democracy (Schmidt, 2001).

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