

Who Are the Real Idealists?

by Richard Evanoff

In the last ecoLogic column we were talking about how the "future" ecological collapse predicted by environmentalists has in fact already started and how the "future" revolution to remedy this collapse is also already underway. I also mentioned the need for constructive and positive views of the future to help us create a truly ecologically sustainable society with genuine liberty and justice for all — not mere lip service. In this month's column I'd like to contrast two competing views of how this might be done: one that is practical, realistic, and achievable, and the other, which is hopelessly utopian, idealistic, and unachievable. I'll let you guess which is which.

In this corner, visionaries #1, who see humanity as standing at the start of a new millennium, an eternal life of production and consumption in which the streets are paved with gold, every house is equipped with an ever-expanding stock of consumer goods, the wilderness has been completely tamed by steel and concrete, and the cities are shining emblems of technological mastery over nature. Moreover, this is not simply a vision of Japan, America, or Europe, but a vision of an entire "new world order" in which there is no longer any split between North and South, developed and developing countries, First and Third World, etc. Economic inequalities still persist, but everyone in the entire world has achieved, at minimum, the lifestyle that Japanese, Americans, and Europeans now enjoy. Technology has wiped out every disease, cured every environmental ill, and even found a way to let us know who is calling on the telephone *before* we pick up the receiver.

In this corner, visionaries #2, who see humanity as running recklessly towards the edge of an ecological abyss. To avoid falling in, the First World agrees to drastically curtail its consumption of the earth's resources and, moreover, to share what it already has in terms of food, clothing, and basic necessities with those in the Third World who need them. Both the First World and Third World

agree to substantially reduce their populations. The Third World, for its part, gives up its fawning dreams of "catching up" with the First World, made easier by the fact that both have been able to stabilize their economies at ecologically sustainable levels that are roughly equal with each other. Energy consumption is greatly reduced and most of our needs are supplied by solar-based technologies. Production is geared not towards extravagant luxuries for the few but to assure that everyone in the world has the basic necessities of life. With consumption, and hence production, way down, people suddenly find they have lots of free time on their hands and there is a flourishing of culture. Instead of being merely passive consumers at the mercy of large multinational corporations and bloated government bureaucracies, people begin to take charge of their lives and to create a genuine participatory society.

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So, who are the real idealists? If you guessed visionaries #1, congratulations, you're *definitely* right. If you guessed visionaries #2 you *may* be right but probably for the wrong reasons. It's more than a little ironic that environmentalists, who advocate sustainable lifestyles within the limits of what nature can actually provide, are routinely dismissed as air-headed, soft-hearted "idealists" while those who advocate unlimited economic growth and ecological destruction are typically praised as a hard-headed, hard-hearted "realists." At least that's the impression you'd get if your only source of information is the mainstream media (and since you're presently reading *Japan Environment Monitor* we know you don't fall into that camp.)

If you're a politician it's easy to rally support with the scenario that the First World will continue forever on its consumeristic stairway to heaven and that the Third World will eventually "catch up." You'll be out there riding on a shoeshine and a smile, waving peace signs to everyone and telling them how much better off they'll be with a Honda in every garage and a Big Mac in every pot. Undoubtedly it's harder to sell people on the scenario that the First World is going to have to drastically decrease its consumption of the world's resources and that the Third World will never "catch up." I mean, Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale both lost elections for telling us that we had to stop denying that we

had serious problems and then face them head-on. Ronald Reagan and George Bush could simply turn their heads and say, "What problems? Stop being so negative. No one wants to listen to all that crap. Tell the people what they want to hear. Things are getting better all the time and the future couldn't be brighter." Well, the future they predicted is the future we're living right now. You can judge for yourself how bright it is, but there's no doubt that bright images, even if they have no basis in reality, help win elections.

Once we cut through all the shoe polish and upbeat manipulation of media images we see that what the first scenario really involves is the even more rapid depletion of the earth's resources, an exponential increase in waste and pollution, and a hastening of the day of ecological judgment. Will the earth really be able to sustain a population of 10.4 billion people in 2029 and provide each one of those persons with First-World lifestyles, complete with cars, televisions, washing machines, and refrigerators? No scenario could be more utopian, idealistic, and unachievable. The earth simply *does not* have the resources, energy, and capacity to absorb wastes that this scenario requires. In the second scenario, however, we see both the First and Third Worlds moving towards ecologically sustainable lifestyles that provide people with the basic material, social, and spiritual needs of life. Given the fact that the First World consumes such a disproportionate amount of the earth's resources, it should be obvious which side bears most of the responsibility for decreasing consumption. This scenario is practical, realistic, and achievable. And if it isn't, it's only because we don't have the *will* to implement it. Only humanity's stunted psychological and moral growth continues to identify egocentric selfishness with "realism" and compassionate sharing with "idealism."

Curtailing economic growth is often regarded as a movement to push humanity back to either the Middle Ages or the Middle Paleolithic. But in fact environmentalists are for, not against, genuine civilization, culture, and citizenship. It is not the environmental movement, but rather the Pied Pipers of unlimited economic growth and development who will ultimately lead us to ecological — and economic — ruin. Sure, we can use up our resources with increasing speed and achieve short-term economic growth. But in the long run, we need a healthy environment if we want to have a healthy economy, and a healthy economy depends upon living within our ecological means instead of beyond them. The real "utopians," then, are not those environmentalists who argue that we need to go back to a more ecologically balanced society, but rather those politicians, business leaders, and technophiles with vested interests who naively proclaim that infinite economic progress is possible, that the god of technolo-

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gy will save us from all environmental disaster, and that we will ultimately walk down the gold streets of everlasting consumerism.

If you want to get a glimpse at where these people are really taking us, however, look at our present reality. "Economic growth" is already destroying not only the environment but also local communities and cultures. Factories close in First World countries and reopen in Third World countries to take advantage of lower wages and looser environmental regulations. Indigenous people are evicted from their homelands as the transnational corporations move in to exploit the natural resources. Devastated cities, shanty towns, homelessness, alcoholism, and prostitution are the results. The poor get poorer while the insatiable desires of the consumer class just keep on growing. More and more resources are used up, more and more pollution is generated, to the point of both ecological and social collapse. If we extrapolate current trends of economic growth and ecological devastation exponentially into the future it's easy to see that we're not headed for heaven but hell. This future is, unfortunately, also eminently practical, realistic, and achievable, and the one we're probably actually headed towards unless we do something to change course. □

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of gene recombination facilities. The purpose is to prevent the dangers of biohazards caused by biotechnology experiments (*Mainichi, Asahi, Nikkei*, Sept 7).

Total CFC destruction — In a joint experiment, Metropolitan Tokyo and the Onoda Cement Co. have confirmed that it is possible to completely break down CFCs (*Yomiuri*, Sept 9).

Hard to keep that CO₂ down — On September 13 the government held a meeting of environmental ministers and formally decided on the report it will submit to the UN covering items such as the forecast on carbon dioxide emissions. It predicts that Japan's CO₂ emissions in 2000 will be 3.1 percent higher than in 1990 (*Asahi, Sankei*, and *Nikkei* evening editions, Sept 13).

But with electric cars... — On September 22 the Environment Agency completed a report saying that the type of vehicle most desirable for holding down carbon dioxide emissions is the electric vehicle, and that increasing their use is an urgent task (*Nikkei*, Sept 23).

Global warming impact — On September 13 the Environment Agency released a report dealing with the impacts of global warming on Japan. It predicts that due to rising sea

level there will be a 40 percent increase in areas subject to the dangers of high tides and tsunamis, and that the seasons will split into a rainy and a dry season (*Sankei, Asahi, Nikkei*, Sept 14).

1993 energy report — On September 26 the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) completed a report on 1993 energy supply and demand, according to which primary energy supply in crude oil equivalent was 548 million kiloliters, representing an increase of 1.2 percent over the previous year (*Nikkei, Mainichi*, Sept 27).

CO₂ emissions and global warming impacts calculated — Recently the National Institute for Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, and Gifu University worked together on calculations for carbon dioxide emissions by country and year. They showed that in 2100 emissions will have increased 3.5 times over 1990, that the average world temperature will have increased about 2.65°C, and that the sea level will have risen 65 cm (*Nikkei*, Oct 1).

Big-ticket public works — At a Cabinet meeting on October 7 the government decided on a new public works investment plan calling for a total budget of ¥630 trillion over the 10 years from 1995 to 2004. The plan includes extending sewerage to over 90 percent of all homes and supplying 1.6 million homes (all papers, Oct 7). □