

PREFACE

How did we ever allow ourselves to be convinced that the only possible green future must be cold, dark and drab? That the very best we can hope for is a little cleverer or more desperate tinkering with our cars and our recycling programs and maybe even our Gods to make them “sustainable” enough — we hope — to get by?

It is not going to work. Tinkering and patching will not change enough things enough, not with the necessary urgency. Not that we won't need every desperate stopgap measure we can get, too — but stopgaps are not answers.

Look two steps deeper, moreover, and you cannot help but suspect that the very things we are trying to patch up are part of the problem itself. We ramp up recycling programs at the same time that we produce ever more megatons — literally — of non-degradable, one-time-use Stuff. Hybrid engines give us a slightly cleaner way of sustaining a transportation system that nonetheless blights ever more land, air, time and lives. Vegetarianism goes mainstream while an ever-thicker curtain descends between us and the rest of the animate world.

There is no way around it: we need to ask more fundamental questions. Not how to recycle more Stuff, for example, but literally and finally what should take its place: how we can make things that are too precious to throw “away” (as if there were such a place) *or* recycle. Or things that just turn back into fertilizer overnight. Not how to raise the dikes or build more floodgates in cities on the edge of the rising seas, but how to *welcome* the waters instead. Imagine adding the waterborne grace of Venice to the sass of New Orleans. Who says we've exhausted the possibilities of cities?

Imagine a world so thoroughly and appealingly re-localized that it has no need for cleaner cars or mass transit, or indeed any large-scale transportation infrastructure at all. Imagine meeting other animals anew, as genuinely fellow creatures, a great Second Chance — what then? Imagine thinking of terrestrial life as so intertwined with the whole cosmos that even we wholehearted Earthlings can contemplate setting out into “space” (as if there were such a place, either) after all.

You see, at least, that *this* way into the future is not just a matter of dragging ourselves a little further toward the Great Drabness that is usually supposed to be all that environmentalism can offer. “Getting by” is not the only possible hope for the future. Instead we could aim for something vastly more visionary, more inventive, more exuberant: for possibilities that lie at an oblique angle both to things as they are *and* to the alternatives that today’s environmentalism has long embraced. There are elegant and audacious alternatives that are not yet even on our maps.

Mobilizations

Green thinking situates the human project and prospects within natural ecological systems: within the great, enveloping natural world. Ecological systems are understood to have their own integrity, their own dynamics, and also their own tipping points and limits, now a matter of vital concern as we begin to recognize that industrial impacts are such a major factor in ecological stability and change. Motives are mixed — some emphatically biocentric, some more focused on specifically human prospects — but regardless, Earth comes back into central view.

Today, however, green thinking has worked itself into a thoroughly distracted and compromised position. It’s almost cliché, for one thing, that environmentalists must be doomsayers. Maybe it’s no surprise, given the seriously sobering facts on the one hand — I don’t deny them for a moment — and so many people’s fierce and deeply embedded denial and resistance to those facts

on the other. Still, the result is that we have forgotten that there are other and far better ways to motivate ourselves than fear.

The alternative offered here is the Green Imagination. Not some detailed plan, desperately to be grasped and defended in every detail against all comers, that is somehow supposed to rescue us from the fix we are in. Not a recipe for getting us there, either. Instead, this book offers an invitation to an across-the-board style of visionary thinking — technological, social, architectural and more — that is thoroughly Earth-centered but also thoroughly inventive, exploratory and farsighted. *Possibility* is the key. Imagination resolutely takes the side of hope, not fear — and hope is open-ended. Imagination is by no means the whole story, but it is the first step.

Today's green thinking has also become almost wholly mitigationist: that is, its central project is to reduce or "mitigate" human impacts on the natural world. What follows is the familiar program that Lester Brown, one of its most visible advocates, calls the *Mobilization*: recycling and pollution reduction; high-efficiency technologies like hybrid motors and LED light bulbs; green buildings. Low- or non-meat diets. Clean(er) industrialism. Further reaches of the same program invite people back to the land for more recreation (actual contact with nature!) and parallel cultural changes, like greener ethics and religion.

I don't deny the importance, even the necessity, of this kind of mobilization. Certainly we will need every kind of efficiency and ecological circumspection we can get. The problem is that today, mitigation entirely consumes our imaginations. Nothing else is being seriously considered. But it is also, frankly, utterly uninspiring. All of that ingenuity and expense merely to make *less difference*? Not to mention, once again, that we cannot make (so to say) less difference enough.

Green Imagination opens up a much wider range of possibilities. Yes, we will still seek to reduce industrial and other human impacts on the natural world. But the project is not to simply

preserve the world we've got today. More visionary thinking, both radically critical and radically inventive, insists upon the possibility of changing that system itself. We aim not to make *less* difference but a *different* difference.

In short, this is a mobilization too, but nothing like Brown's mobilization of the technocrats. Today, above all, we need to mobilize the imagination. The great task is to reclaim the future from the mitigationist vision, if you could call it that, of merely getting by.

It is part of the same spectacularly limited vision that talk of "radical" environmentalism today only brings to mind tree-spiking or eco-sabotage, an unaccountably extremist rejection of the entire modern world, as if there were nothing beyond it, no other possibility except some thoroughly romanticized past, or maybe just a sheer sense of betrayal and rage. There are reasons for this—the powers-that-be have formidable ways of shaping and shading awareness—but it is our task, nonetheless, to reclaim the possibility of radical change for a tomorrow that can be, as the architect Paolo Soleri puts it, "prodigiously affirmative." Imagination is the way!

Method

So be ready: a certain extravagance is part of my method. It is first and foremost a response, both impatient and I hope inviting, to the spiritlessness of our time, though I would also point out that hyper-provocation—a deliberate embrace of off-the-scale "prompts"—is a technique recommended, in all seriousness, by creativity experts (yes, there are such people) to open up radically new imaginative spaces.

Rather than toning things down, anyway, this book is more apt to take a reasonable idea two steps too far, connect it to five others, and then suggest that the resulting vision might be a good *beginning*. It is not enough to merely offer a few faint hopes for a slightly greener world, almost audibly whistling past the graveyard like so many painfully earnest environmentalist books that fill the

bookstores today. Extending the metaphor, this book is more apt to propose a fireworks show or a carnival in the graveyard, maybe accompanied by an opera company or a troupe of monkeys or a seventh-grade poetry slam, and to ask if there mightn't be some quite wonderful ways of living with our dead ancestors after all. Desperate times call for rethinking everything. You get the idea: whatever this book's deficiencies — which are many, to be sure — at least it doesn't lack for chutzpah.

My aim is not to add more information to current debates or to defend one side or the other. This book does not even address such seeming basics as when exactly oil will finally run dry or whether or not climate change is primarily caused by greenhouse gases. It does not answer every possible objection, or even most of the likely ones (though the Chapter Notes at the end of the book do briefly address a few). It's a manifesto, remember, not a philosophical treatise or a piece of journalism or a careful, cautious, hedged, well-fortified argument in the usual academic style. There is a time and place for that style — I know, I am an academic myself — but not now, or anyway not by me.

People are ready. More than ready. I see it in my students — the young, always ready to go — as well as in friends and colleagues, fellow environmentalists and still others besides, including all too many who are, alas, on the edge of despair. This book is for you: for anyone eager to make a genuine difference to Earth's future; in it for the long haul; open to new visions beyond the alternatives we know — in fact desperate for them — but not yet able to envisage a solution that inspires. My hope is that *we* can do so, together, starting here and now.

True: "we" are not everyone. Environmentalism may sometimes seem like the whole world, but in fact it is a specific social movement in a specific place and time. By and large today's self-identified green movement is an upsurge from the epicenters of the world's power and privilege, as well as the epicenters of most of its effluents. You could justifiably wonder whether green imagination itself is not a privilege of wealth and power. The world

looks totally different to most Americans than it looks to those more obviously breathing or drinking a lifetime of toxic wastes or at risk of clear-cutting-induced mudslides in Central America or climate-change-induced flooding in Bangladesh, on the receiving end of our CO₂ and garbage barges and fighter-bombers. In their world, it's not "humanity" that's an ecological problem — it's *us*.

In the best of faith some of us therefore try to disavow that privileged "we" and join our fate with those others — which also means giving up the privilege of our position and making our fates one with the disempowered and wretched of the Earth. Some insist that we shall have neither peace nor ecological harmony until the epicenter completely dissolves itself and human cultures in general return to the hardy and circumspect Old Ways.

I feel these pulls too. It is hard to avoid feeling, at times, that the Old Way is the only way forward. Certainly, at the very least, an openness to *other* ways is another vital and necessary means of opening up radical kinds of imaginative space. This book will move in those directions more than once.

Yet I do not argue for the dissolution of the epicenter. I urge, instead, its transformation. My working hypothesis is that we can and must create systematic, radical alternatives here, right at the epicenter, thoroughly and insistently leveraging the spirit of possibility that isn't just our privilege but is also, now, a necessity. *We*, in the specific and not-for-everyone sense I have been acknowledging, need to get *our* world sorted out. Transferred to the cultural sphere, it's the same point I want to make about the Mobilization's mitigationism. Here too the task is not to shrink ourselves into a corner, to dissolve ourselves into "no impact," but rather to find another, new, even spectacular way — more mutualistic, more open-ended, more fertile and/but also, quite likely, distinctively our own — to co-inhabit this world.

Marx argued that certain stages of economic development open up the possibility of more progressive stages in turn. The same may be true, more loosely speaking, of social and technological forms. All of today's forms of life, including ours, have

manifold new possibilities as well as unrealized older possibilities well worth reclaiming. But they are not necessarily the same possibilities. Ours are not necessarily better, or worse. Oftentimes they may be burdens as much as opportunities. But in any case they are different. Vision is about going on from where we are, not about “going back” or starting somewhere else. We are at a Turning Point, not a Dead End.

Onward

Green visionaries are at work already, all over the map. Designers like Paolo Soleri and William McDonough are trying to interest the Chinese, now throwing up new million-resident cities by the dozens, in completely re-envisioned, hyper-compact city designs. The indefatigable Stewart Brand, fresh from trying to place a portrait of the Whole Earth (the “Big Here,” he calls it) into every classroom on the planet, is promoting giant, ridiculously *slow* clocks in city centers and high mountains to remind us that we live not in milliseconds but in millennia: the “Long Now.” Permaculturists hook up their composting toilets to their stoves and cook with the methane. God-intoxicated hermits and other free spirits follow the extreme surfers right into the great hurricanes when everyone else is fleeing the other way. Musicians like Jim Nollman jam with singing whales on the open seas, making genuinely inter-species music.

This is wonderful work, and inspires much in the pages to follow. There are citations and links to it in the Chapter Notes at the end. Yet it is not my aim to offer a survey of the state of the more ambitious and imaginative end of today’s environmentalism. The problem is not really that the green imagination is less visible than it should be, or that it hasn’t been surveyed already. The real problem is that there isn’t anywhere near enough of it. Despite some inventiveness in a few places, most green thinkers seem to have concluded that the best way to make a difference is to keep their heads low, downplaying any emerging possibilities for broader-scale change, even to themselves. Imagination gets reduced to

the least visionary common denominator — which is, alas, pretty close to zero. Whereas, in my view, we need a whole new level not just of visibility but of confidence. More audacity, nerve, chutzpah, sass. Mobilizing the imagination must be a culture-wide initiative, not another program to be left to a few on the fringes.

In short, then, this book offers a set of methods for imagination-driven cultural redesign, from the near side of the ecological crisis, anchored in and inspired by a dozen or two possibilities for radically new kinds of systems and ways of living, some of them already taking shape but many others, as yet barely suspected, awaiting *you*, perhaps, to bring them into the light. Or to devise better ones. Take it as a challenge. The largest vision toward which this manifesto points is not some new doctrine or plan, not a new and already-worked-out set of possibilities, but rather a more critical and at the same time free-spirited welcome *toward possibility itself*, toward the extraordinary moment at which we stand and into the unique imaginative space that embracing our moment opens up.

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