

FROM THE  
EDITOR



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## WANTED: A NEW PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

Our entire economic system is fundamentally dependent upon the functional integrity of natural and living systems that are losing patience with us. That is to say, these systems have a limited capacity to tolerate human extraction from them and excretion of waste products and byproducts into them, and human economic activity worldwide is colliding with those limits.

Why? The reasons are many, but one key factor is our deep ontological misprision. A hallmark of the modern era is that we think of the human realm as set apart from the rest of the world and that we can manipulate it, engineer it, as we see fit in accordance with what we find meaningful and valuable. We are still wedded to that worldview and seem blindly determined to pursue it to its logical extremes. Biophysical systems, even when they are scientifically well-understood, are mistakenly seen as *things we live off of*, not as *places we live within*.

It is essential to change our way of thinking about economics. In the past, the main contention has been between those who emphasize efficiency and those who emphasize equity; or between those who stress growth and those who stress just redistribution of existing wealth; or between those who own and control capital and those who own mainly their own labor and skills. These arguments are not passé, by any means; the struggle for fairness and equality has not been won.

But a new struggle must be, and is being, added to it. A new perspective is emerging to infuse and inform our normative discourse about economics, power, and justice. Let us call this perspective the new “ecological political economy.” It places economic activity in the context of the operation of physical and biological systems. It includes the important subfield of economics known as ecological economics, but is broader in the way it brings ethical and governance issues together with economic ones, hence the return to the traditional phrase, political economy.

Ecological political economy calls us to take into account the fact that the planetary systems

that support life in its most fundamental physical, chemical, and organic manifestations have boundaries, tolerances, and thresholds. These boundaries should—and ultimately will—constrain the extractive and the excretory activity of human individuals and societies. What individuals do one at a time is important, but the social, institutional level is an essential focus here because the effects of human action are greatly magnified by the collective capacity of institutionally structured economies and technologies. As planetary boundaries are approached (or exceeded), ecosystem functions are undermined and overwhelmed, thereby rendering them—and the social systems that depend upon them—less able to support either human or natural communities that are flourishing and healthy, diverse and resilient. No longer are only justice and dignity at stake, now minimally decent survival is in question, as well.

There can be only one conclusion. Our accelerating, global extractive assault on planetary resources and ecosystems, as well as the unprecedented extensions of our technologic reach, do not truly represent progress and the triumph of human freedom or the human destiny. Why not? For one thing, as is by now familiar, they are not sustainable or viable as a road to the future.

FROM THE  
EDITOR

No less important, but less often noted, is the fact that technological advance and extractive assault contain an inner contradiction. While seeming to extend human freedom, they are laying the groundwork for its repression; while seemingly representing the advanced expression of human capability, they are actually undermining what is most precious in humanness.

To find a healed relationship between humans and nature, how then should we think about humanness? I suggest that two ideas help lead us in a fruitful direction: First, the intertwined notions of innovative human agency and developmental capability—humans are remarkably good at doing new things, and they can improve or get better at what they do. Second, the normative imperative to treat the individual human being as a person—it is of great ethical value to be (and to be allowed to be) an acting, doing subject, rather than merely living as an object that is acted upon and done to. In short, humans are able to comprehend themselves as beings who become, as purposive agents who can live—and should live—without external domination. From this follows the awareness that *the world can be otherwise than it has been in the past and is now*. One might say that the concepts of freedom and human rights were invented to take the moral measure of such a being, once humankind had discovered (or reinvented) itself in this way.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt developed an anatomy of our humanness along these lines, using a suggestive but rather idiosyncratic terminology. According to Arendt, human beings are (1) creatures of “labor” who are subject to the biological rhythms of their organic needs; (2) practitioners of “work” who are subject to the creative encounter between natural materials and imaginative form; and (3) performers of “action,” especially speech acts or communicative acts, through participation in the deliberative process of shaping common meanings in the public, symbolic order.

The failure to live within planetary boundaries and limits—thereby turning our back on our interdependency with the earth and our own earthly,

creaturely condition—will fundamentally threaten and transform the dimensions of labor, work, and action. Labor will produce illness rather than health. Creative work will become increasingly unavailable and unavailing. Action will devolve into bargaining and positioning for strategic advantage. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, precisely those baleful transformations in the human condition, this hobbling of human possibility, seem well advanced.

So we would do well not to underestimate the task facing ecological political economy. It is both an ontological reorientation and an ethical innovation. It goes beyond the physical and life sciences in a descriptive sense and implicates the normative foundations of social order and human agency. Ecological political economics is a new story and a new conceptual framework within which we must make public policy and reform in the major structures of our society. It is the narrative of a journey of discovery concerning how to imagine, construct, comprehend, and govern a new form of social order that will achieve justice and empower flourishing life and living.

Ecological political economy, in other words, is a search for a “public philosophy” suitable to the unprecedented challenges of our time. A public philosophy provides normative guidance and a context for

FROM THE  
EDITOR

the legitimation of governance and public policy. It can also provide a framework for the formation of democratic consensus through participatory deliberation. Grounded in solid natural and social scientific knowledge, as it ideally should be, a public philosophy is emergent and dynamic, not dogmatic. It reflects an ethical vision of what the ends of economic agency and democratic citizenship should be. All economies, including a future ecological one, will appropriate natural matter and energy and, through labor, transform them into products for human use and exchange. And for this the coordination and organization of very large numbers of people, a vast massing of human agency, will be required in agriculture, mining and manufacturing, science and technology, transportation, construction, and the like. Such coordination requires a sense of common purpose, and a public philosophy is essential in the imagination and discovery of what that purpose should be.

A public philosophy also holds a moral mirror up to each one of us. It is not only a narrative of discovering a new form of social order, it is also a narrative of discovering a new self-identity and a new way to live. In the market-oriented public philosophy dominant in the world today, the individual must live out the following narrative, the ideal of selfhood of *homo economicus*: To survive and flourish, the economic self must fulfill (biological and psychological) needs. To meet your needs, you must compete successfully to extract value from the labor of others or to secure access to positions in which your own labor can provide the necessary income. To compete, you must understand and come to dominate the natural and social systems you inhabit. In this narrative, the desire to acquire and consume is taken to be psychologically unlimited. The individual then is compelled by its inner nature and external circumstance to appropriate and strive to dominate both its social and its natural environment. As a result, growth in the activities of extraction and excretion knows no bounds and perforce overcomes all other considerations.

We hurtle toward barriers ahead and apply the accelerator rather than the brakes. In this we have

been taught to understand ourselves as free and responsible members of society. We provide for ourselves and our families. We pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and stand on our own two feet. This story of selfhood is hollow and self-defeating. It is a cathedral with no alter.

In contrast, the kind of self called forth in an ecological political economy has a quite different narrative. We don't quite know yet how to foster the psycho-social development of such selves or write their collective biography on a large scale. How may *homo economicus* (the self as gaming, calculating maximizer of personal utility) be transformed into *homo faber* (the self as craftsman, responsible for and respectful of his materials)? How can selves be nurtured so as to become deliberative democratic citizens attentive to the common good and obligations of trusteeship for the natural world? How can the current neoliberal world of extractive liberty and possessive individualism be transformed into a world of relational or communal liberty, solidarity, mutual compassion and respect?

From these questions follow equally searching ones about governance. How can an open, liberal society—one in which each individual has a wide range of freedom and opportunity to live his or her own life in their own way—also be an objectively sustainable,

FROM THE  
EDITOR

healthy society that respects ecological boundaries and limits? How can state power be kept to a minimum if each person is to be protected against collective hazards over which he or she has virtually no control and only a paltry defense? (The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy comes to mind, and even conservative, anti-government politicians were calling for the federal government, that is the American people as a whole, to be active and directive then.) These questions indicate the dilemma of reconciling personal autonomy with the common good. This dilemma has long been at the heart of modern politics, but today arises in a new, unprecedented global form. It will be at the core of politics in the transition from a neoliberal market political economy to an ecological political economy, and then will remain in the ongoing governance of the ecological political economy of the future. (Just as this issue of *Minding Nature* appears, the Center for Humans and Nature has also launched on its website a series of reflections on the question: “Can democracy in crisis deal with the climate crisis?” This question is led by Center Senior Scholars Benjamin Barber and Carol Gould and features discussions by other leading social and environmental theorists and activists.)

Ecological political economy demands a regime of social control that is not compatible with the life narrative of *homo economicus* and with the wide scope of individual and corporate freedom from (state) interference in the use of extractive power that has been widespread among the affluent of the developed world in the last century. What is the best way to frame this issue—As a balancing or trade-off of conflicting values? As a regrettable but necessary contraction of the sphere of individual freedom of choice made necessary by ecosystemic limits? Or perhaps as a refinement—itsself morally positive and progressive—of our understanding of freedom? That is, a refinement in our moral sensibility such that ecologically destructive behavior would not be seen as a manifestation of freedom at all, but rather would come to be repudiated as a manifestation of ignorance, irresponsibility, and alienation. If we frame this problem as one of balancing values, then who con-

trols the scales? If we frame it as a devolution of freedom for the sake of survival, then what level of coercion will be used against the recalcitrant, self-destructive among us?

I believe that it will not be through fear and the desire for security in an ecologically altered and disrupted world (“global weirdness,” as Climate Central calls it) that the public philosophy of ecological economics will be able to succeed. It will succeed primarily through the positive inspiration and promise of a new kind of freedom, meaning, and flourishing. The message of planetary boundaries is not the bad news of less liberty and more sharp elbows, but the promise of a new, more humanly fulfilling kind of liberty and mutuality. This new freedom and a sense of solidarity can justify and motivate the kinds of social change needed nationally and globally in the next generation.

In practice, this means that the story line of a new public philosophy of ecological political economy must have recourse to values and purposes that the members of these societies will understand if they think and act like interdependent and relational selves—“ecological selves,” and “ecological citizens,” if you please. Part of the task of a new public philosophy, remember, is to shape this self-identity and foster a moral imagination that can see the good and free-

FROM THE  
EDITOR

dom in relational terms. Its task is to re-member us. The present mainstream public philosophy over the years has helped to build a population of possessive individualists through its doctrines and through the institutions it has legitimated. Now we must be no less intentional about the task of educating a new generation of social persons. The time has come for economic knowledge and discourse to show all of us, specialists and ordinary citizens alike, that our personal flourishing is inextricably linked to the flourishing of others (justice) and to the flourishing of the natural world (trusteeship). A new public philosophy and democratic governance will have to appeal to a motivational structure that is informed by what has been traditionally called “civic virtue,” and what today might better be called civic trusteeship. For now, like it or not, we are each entrusted with the wellbeing of the commonwealth. Ecological civic trusteeship is not so much a role, or a legal status, as it is an orientation and a disposition of living that is grounded in a sense of responsibility for promoting and sustaining the common good of the human and biotic community as a whole and its essential biophysical ground.

In order to tell a new story, a new public philosophy will need a vocabulary of relational concepts, metaphors, and images—solidarity, mutuality, reciprocity, community, care, place, resilience—with which to map the journey to an ecological economy, democracy, and self. This is a narrative to fashion and nurture an ecology of the mind and of the heart.

In this issue of *Minding Nature*, there are several varied and rich narratives of exactly this kind. Good food for thought, I believe, to nourish our common exploration of a new public philosophy that will do a much better job than the current one does of minding nature.

In the wake of the 2012 presidential election campaign in which global warming and climate change were not discussed, Julianne Warren leads off the issue with an impassioned plea to End Climate Silence. Her reflective essay combines a sense of place with a sense of justice. Warren locates her reaction to Hurricane Sandy, and other

recent storms, in the context of her sense of place and history in upstate New York, where her family home is located, and in relation to the ways in which the Occupy movement can be extended to ecological crisis and injustice.

Whether Aldo Leopold would have joined the Occupy movement in Madison or not, we do not know; but it is clear that he would not be happy with the behavior of Wall Street today, just as he was not pleased with it in the 1930s. Leopold is not best remembered for his thinking about economics, but that is an oversight, for he had many profound insights concerning what I am calling ecological political economy. Qi Feng Lin’s essay, which is part of a longer study of Leopold currently in progress, focuses on the new directions that the discipline of economics was taking in Leopold’s time, especially in the intellectual atmosphere at the University of Wisconsin. It also provides a close reading of Leopold’s economic essays, which provide an important addition to his more familiar ideas in *A Sand County Almanac*.

In our global world of high level policymaking and finance, a detailed study by Kathryn Papp and Janis Alcorn demonstrates the importance and the success of local knowledge and local participation in wise land and water conservation and management. In effect, this essay picks up on and continues

FROM THE  
EDITOR

themes broached by Warren and Lin—the limitations of global policy and finance, the significance of a rich and thick sense of place and responsibility for it, and the lessons of grassroots involvement in successful land use management, as in Wisconsin’s Coon Valley. In an analysis of innovative approaches to natural systems management known as “network governance,” Papp and Alcorn discuss examples from Bali, where an ancient network integrating religion, ritual, and water distribution still functions to maintain high-yield rice production, the Arctic Circle where indigenous organizations have successfully cared for the land for millennia, and the Gran Chaco region of South America, where the shifting course of rivers has fostered new forms of cooperation across multiple communities.

Two additional articles in this issue are based on presentations made recently at the 2012 Chicago Regional Forum on Ethics and Sustainability, sponsored by the Center for Humans and Nature and the Chicago Botanic Garden last October 16. The theme of this Forum was “Healing Nature.”

“Nature provides benefits and is healing to the human soul.” So Laura Sewall begins her essay on the healing aspects of the relationship between humans and nature. Based on a college course, “Nature and Psyche,” she taught with conservation biologist and natural historian Tom Fleischner, she tells the story of her experiences and those of her students in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, in southern Utah, a protected area where the geology reveals millions of years of earth history. She also discusses the scientific research findings concerning the healing benefits—and the neurological effects—of direct interaction with non-human nature. She makes a compelling case for developing an “ecological worldview” and a “relational sensibility.” Just so. “[T]here are *all sorts of healing to be had*,” she maintains, “if only we turn again toward the natural other, attentive, and letting our thoughts roam, our curiosity soar.”

Martha Twaddle is a hospice physician who uses horticulture therapy in the care of the dying. In this sensitive essay, she combines her understanding of palliative care with her experience and

sensibility of a lover of gardens. She offers us a profound meditation on the power of humans and nature relationships in the process of the relief of suffering and healing.

Rounding out this issue, Emily Nguyen-Vo reflects on the ethics and the cultural constructions of a sense of place and furthers our appreciation of this crucial concept. Michael Gusmano reviews an important new book by Lisa Eckenwiler, *Long-term Care, Globalization, and Justice*. And Anja Claus provides the Last Word with thoughts on planning and architecture in cities that give shape not only to the built environment and natural habitat, but also for an environment of the moral imagination and that relational sensibility to which Sewall refers.