Gray-areas in Green Politics: Reflections on the Modern Environmental Movement

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"The phrase ‘only one earth’ was born on the Apollo 8 mission circling the moon... The image of the tiny earth with the moon in the foreground, simultaneously shown on TV sets around the globe, changed man’s cosmic view of his home."

The environmental consciousness that emerged in the 1960s as scientific research brought to the forefront the realities of the earth’s finite resources has in the past few years come under scrutiny, while the ecological movements of that time now seem unsophisticated in their enthusiasm, and ideologically suspect. Key contributions to earlier ecological movements, such as Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962), known as the “watershed of the modern environmental movement” because it infiltrated public sentiment by exposing the excesses of industrial agriculture; Buckminster Fuller’s Whole Earth Catalog which emphasized the fear of ecological crisis; and Constantinos Doxiadis’s Ekistics (1968) which aimed to define how built settlements would be sensitive to the global ecosystem: each of these positions assumed that the natural environment has a stable “ecological balance” which needs to be preserved, and each sought to establish a “harmonious” interdependence among humans and nature.

The assumptions behind modern environmental movements, contemporary critics argue, obscure “the social relations and priorities that go into environmental practices” and depoliticize environmental matters. The book Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature (edited by William Cronon, 1995), which is a collection of essays by leading environmentalists across disciplines, presents some of the most persuasive challenges against the modern environmental movement of the 1960s. This book demonstrates that far from being “universal,” conceptions of nature are tacitly associated with political structures of cultural domination, racial biases, social beliefs, class divisions or gender politics. Each of the book’s articles reveals the complex entanglement of the “natural” with the “human” world and uncovers how the constructed dualism between the two is not simply false but politically prejudiced. William Cronon’s article, for example, demonstrates that wealthy suburbanites who protest the farmers who “exploit nature,” do not represent an untainted concern for the destruction of nature’s “balance.” Rather, their “environmental” arguments are predicated on class biases, and in their righteous protectionism threaten to deprive the farmer of his/her living. Similarly, Candace Slater’s article “Amazonia as Edenic Narrative” uncovers how popular notions which pigeonhole the Yanomami Indians as an intrinsic part of their “natural” environment fail to recognize the needs of this tribe as a human culture. Dominant tendencies to exoticize this tribe of Amazonia as “natural,” Slater argues, are predicated on romantic paradigal and Edenic images, and dehumanize a place with thousands of inhabitants. (fig. 1)

Expositions of tacit political and power dynamics, such as those of Uncommon Ground, promise to empower those who have been suppressed by essentializing concepts of...
nature. Yet these insights are at once enlightening and hindering for the purposes of environmentalism. In uncovering the political partialities of earlier environmental movements and in uprooting any transcultural understanding of nature, current analyses do not only relativize nature, but also relativize the concerns about the environment, and may end up turning them into political issues alone.

The predicament behind the politics of environmentalism was most striking in a recent BBC-World Service Report about an international summit on nuclear proliferation. The radio correspondent meticulously accounted for all the positions voiced by the parties at the summit: The Russian representative asserted that nuclear reactors in Russia were operating within "established safety specifications"; the British prime minister, in turn, doubted this assertion; the French envoy confined himself to impossibly ambiguous remarks; and "the Environmentalists," the BBC correspondent continued, categorically demanded that most of the nuclear reactors scattered around the former USSR countries be closed immediately because they are older and in worse condition than Chernobyl.

It may be a substantial success for those "environmentalists" represented in the summit to have their voice heard along with the opinions of top Government officials from many countries. However, by inserting themselves within the international political spectrum, these environmentalists were constituted as a political entity, and their position was represented in the media as one of the many political voices. In the process, environmental concerns become a political posture, which obscures the fact that if another "Chernobyl-type" disaster happens, everybody (whatever their politics) will be affected.

This predicament is acknowledged by the authors of *Uncommon Ground*. Despite their systematic expositions of "the multiple natures of that thing we are quick to call nature," many of the authors in *Uncommon Ground*, point out that "nature" as the non-human world does, after all, exist. Along with her expositions of the gender biases behind modern meta-narratives about nature, Carolyn Merchant, for instance, also declares that "the environmental crisis is real" and that "the vanishing frogs, fish, songbirds are telling us the truth." This warning exemplifies the ambivalence of the author who recognizes that once nature is presented as an ideologically determined concept, and the protection of the environment is perceived as a political tactic, then there is a danger that we lose sight of threats that are caused by the destruction of the environment, threats that exist beyond the realm of relativity and the politics of knowledge.

To tackle this predicament, I propose to reconsider the premises of the modern environmental movement and to explore how its insights could help rethink environmentalism as a critical attitude for the present. Using "Ekistics" as a representative case for the environmental consciousness that emerged in the sixties, I reflect both on the inadequa-
Doxiades’s Ekistics represents the ideas of architectural modernism in its more critical stage, when it began to temper the optimism for technological progress with environmental awareness and anxiety about the earth’s overpopulation and finite resources. In his books and in the Journal Ekistics, Doxiades gave a terrifying portrait of the environmental “catastrophe” that awaits if no systematic “plan of action” is taken for a more “sensible” utilization of earth’s resources. He passionately emphasized the need to sustain “the ecological balance.” The goal of Ekistics was to outline a global system of development that would make a wise use of the environment, by reconciling, Doxiades argued, “the human efforts for growth and development” with the limitations of a “finite world.” Ekistics intended to respond to massive construction demands around the world promoting, as Doxiades argued, “social and economic development” (e.g., post-war reconstruction for Europe, housing for South America, urban institutions for the emerging states in the Middle East); at the same time, Ekistics would outline how built environments could remain sensitive to the vulnerability of nature. (fig. 2)

Similar to Rachel Carson’s method of analyzing the relationships between living organisms and their surroundings, Ekistics studied the relationship between built settlements and the natural setting and attempted outline a problem-solving process for global planning that defined how settlements should be planned in balance with nature. “Human settlements” (notice, the universalistic connotations of the very term) were treated as organisms having a reciprocal relationship with their larger environment.

Resource and environmental management became central to the Ekistic method of planning in order to defend the natural and built environment. Doxiades created meticulous scientific charts that calculated the resources in a place and specified material-types to be used in different areas, methods for underground water distribution, rules for land distribution for different regions, etc. Ekistics then inserted these specifications into calculations about the

“Ekistics,” was one of the first theories that introduced environmental concerns into the realm of architecture and planning. Developed by the Greek urban planner Constantinos Doxiades (1913-1975) in the late fifties, Ekistics—the “Science of Human Settlements”—was an interdisciplinary theory aimed at outlining methods for structuring an economically and ecologically viable urbanized world for the future. (The term “Ekistics,” coined by Doxiades himself, is derived form the Greek word oikos, meaning home, and has the same roots as the word “Ecology.”) Doxiades’s theory of Ekistics had a tremendous impact around the world: By the mid-sixties, it was taught in universities; it formed the basis for government programs on urban development in the US, Italy, Greece, Brazil, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, and other countries; and it was incorporated in the agenda of the Habitat, the United Nations conference on Human settlements.
ecological balance of a specific place and the globe at large. (fig. 3)

The widespread acceptance of the Ekistic theory and its worldwide implementation as an environmentally sensitive planning method depended very much on the presentation of Doxiades's technical and managerial consulting as a rational, disinterested analysis, detached from the specific locale it studied. This "detachment" concealed political questions of power and inequality into technical issues of natural resources and their management. With rhetoric such as "action needs to be taken" Doxiades systematically concealed by whom the required action would be taken. In most cases, Doxiades’s decisions were confined within established governmental agendas, which were, in turn, often funded by private US agencies operating around the world. Far from being democratically determined, Doxiades's decisions on where housing should be built, or how dense it should be, failed to address the needs of the less privileged in a society. (9) Imposing strict zoning separations in the name of environmental efficiency, Doxiades remained oblivious to the social inequalities inherent in these territorial divisions, and even exacerbated them. (10) This is the irony of the purported neutrality of such "ecologically conscious" urban ordering: the proclaimed

aim to protect of natural assets, trees and scenery and to improve local climate, camouflaged the reality of segregation of the poor from the upper classes. (11)

As we come to see the specifics of the Ekistic theory, we can recognize in it elements emblematic of both the strengths and weaknesses of the modern environmental sensibility. The modern environmentalists’ attempts to systematically capture, order and objectify ecological processes often overlooked dominant power structures, and exacerbated social and cultural inequalities. Yet their pioneering institution of ecological sensitivity, their call for prudent utilization of local resources, and their regard to global needs for housing and infrastructure could continue to bring to focus the crucial issues that affect many parts of the world today. (fig. 4) While their all-encompassing, classificatory charts must be criticized for constructing regions as bounded, determinate and controllable objects of study, they actively propelled a systematic investigation of the limitations of the earth’s resources.

Indeed, despite the pitfalls of modern environmental approaches their larger aspirations can exercise a refreshing critique against overzealous relativizations of environmental problems. Whether earlier efforts such as Doxiades'
Fuller's or Carson's succeeded or failed is less important now than the fact that, like the environment itself, their premises reach beyond the realm of relativity into supra-political concerns. It is in this spirit that modern environmental thought can offer critical orientations to current environmental predicaments. I would argue for a radical re-evaluation that would negotiate the overlaps between the modern consciousness and current critical thought, not so much to regain the conviction of earlier movements, but to redirect the admirable energy and sophistication of current critiques towards more effective directions. Current critical thought could disentangle environmental approaches from an all-encompassing, universalistic and rationalist framework of thought, while the aspirations of ecological sensitivity would not be consumed by total relativism.

To illustrate how the negotiation between current critiques and earlier ecological premises could be constructive, consider once again, Slater's deconstruction of "Edenic Narratives" in *Uncommon Ground* which has been quite convincing is showing that:

"It is well worth asking not just how we can save the rain forest but why we want to do so. Whom do we wish to benefit? And why focus our efforts on Amazonia instead of Africa, Antarctica, or Northern California? Before we try to answer these essential questions, however, we must ask what we mean by 'the rain forest'. What exactly do we think we want to safeguard?"

Consider, also, the leap from these insightful remarks to the conclusion that immediately follows them, a leap which threatens to nullify efforts for environmental protection:

"It will be hard enough to reverse the acrid course of recent history in Amazonia. But it is impossible to rescue something that does not exist".

Indeed, to use Slater's own terms, we should not be "quick" to call something "nature"; but, neither should we be so quick in dismissing "nature" as something that does not exist. If critiques such as Slater's aim to argue that environmental approaches "impinge...not just on trees and animals but on countless human lives" they should do this without paralyzing efforts to prevent environmental destruction, because such destruction would also impinge on "human lives." In the case of Slater's argument, the destruction of the Amazon region would affect, among others, the Yanomani Indians themselves.

While any efforts to protect the Amazon region should guard against tendencies to essentialize the traditional lifestyle of the Yanomani Indians as an intrinsic part of "nature," the ecological problems around the Amazon should not themselves be entirely relativized. The need to
respond to environmental destruction should remain in focus, even though we should guard against any attempt to collapse "protective measures" onto nostalgic preconceptions of a romantic "nature" that would treat local cultures as voiceless observers of external environmental measures imposed on them. Environmental responses would need to be actively negotiated with the complexities and demands of the local culture, engaging with the politics of difference and the fluid realities of "nature" and "culture." The complex actualities of difference would reinforce, rather than replace, ecological sensitivity.

What I am arguing then is that critiques of the modern environmental movement come not as dismissals but as extensions of it. In this way environmentalism could transcend relativism, while highlighting the dangers of essentialism and universalism. Perhaps the most radical responses to environmental questions cannot emanate from overzealous rejections of an earlier environmental consciousness, but from a negotiated position; one which operates "in-between," aiming to remain vigilantly critical without losing the capacity to act.

2 Yasuro Okashi, "Rachel Carson's Silent Spring" in Disson, Fall 1995, p.541.
4 "Environmentalism" envelopes diverse positions which can be intensely antagonistic to one another. For the purposes of this essay, however, I use the terms "environmentalism" and "environmentalists" in the broadest possible sense, to refer to any movements, organized groups or even individuals who are actively concerned with environmental protection.
5 Carolyn Merchant, "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative" in Uncommon Ground, p.137.
6 Ivan Pedro de Martins captures very well the context in which Doniaides operated: "...two aspects of knowledge coincided in the circles of science and later of policy-making: the knowledge of the planet as a container for mankind and for the resources that allow human life, and the exhaustion of certain fundamental products in the foreseeable future, a generation hence, such as oil; a crisis that is bringing home to millions a sense of danger and the eagerness to challenge it through a rational approach to the ecological problem." (Ivan Pedro de Martins, "Random Factors: Ekistics, Ecology and a Think Tank: An approach to Settlement Planning from Doniaides Onwards", in Third World Planning Review, Vol.2, No.2, Autumn 1980, p.139)
7 The journal Ekistics (founded in 1955 and still in circulation) was, during the sixties, edited in Cambridge, MA and circulated in 94 countries.
8 Ekistics attempted to combine numerous disciplines in the design of human settlements in addition to ecology, it took into account economic, psychological and sociological factors. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on those aspects of the Ekistic theory that attempted to connect urban design to ecological concerns.
9 Many of Doniaides's ideas on this subject were compiled in his later book Ekology and Ekistics (1977)
10 His plan of Islamabad, for example—a plan which inserted the Capital of Pakistan into an ecologically conscious global schema—overlooked the questions of power and inequality between the local regime and the various classes of the population. See Lawrence Vale, Architecture, Power and National Identity.
11 In his restructuring of Athens, for example, Doniaides claimed that his plan would make the city more efficient in order to minimize the destruction of the environment surrounding the city. People, he argued, should be housed close to their workplace in order to minimize pollution from transportation. (See Doniaides, Our Capital and Its Future, 1960) Yet, how was this "environmental concern" connected to his decision to elevate lower-class workers at the industrial area of Eleonas and to leave the privileged Gagons of the Penteli mountain to the high government officials?
12 Doniaides's proposals also concealed larger cultural dynamics: The insertion of the new towns in Iraq or Islamabad into the megastucture of a global interconnected ecosystem assumed a transcultural uniformity in the model of urbanization, and did not consider the questions of inequality and cultural imperialism in global relationships. Similarly, Doniaides never acknowledged the influence of western funding institutions on his decisions to promote certain agricultural developments and to abandon others. The universal claim that Doniaides’s 'scientific' and "ecological" approach made, depoliticized his interventions which were nevertheless inevitably tied to such issues as land distribution, allocation of resources, class divisions, and transcultural power dynamics.
13 Slater, in Uncommon Ground, p.130.
contents

Introduction

4

Paul Carter
with Charles Anderson

7

Against Projects
the Dis/appearance: waiting room collaboration

Ignasi de Solà-Morales

18

Present and Futures
Architecture in Cities

Christine McGrath

29

Consolidated Periphery
Commercial and Highway Interchange

James K. Casper

34

Entropy and Surfaceness

Kristina Hill

41

Learning Where Not to Build

Panayiota Pyla

48

Gray-areas in Green Politics
Reflections on the Modern Environmental Movement

Azin Valy & Suzan Wines

57

Lt. Petrosino Park

James Wines

60

Passages
Some Notes on the Fusion of Buildings and Landscape

Mark Bain

70

Projectiles

Aspasia Maheras

76

Corporeal Consciousness
& The Permeability of Space: Bath House

Phillip Jones

82

Industrial Nocturnes
photographs

author and illustration credits