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The Ecological Perspective in U.S. Foreign Policy

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The "ecological perspective", as developed by Harold and Margaret Sprout, is a conceptual framework for the analysis of political man's relationships with the physical environment. In an age cognizant of growing resource scarcities their theorizing has been granted increasing—if somewhat belated—recognition by political scientists. However, the impact of the ecological perspective upon policy processes has been noticeably less. Our present concern is with U.S. foreign policy. Therefore the focus of this study will be upon the policy options open to Americans as we confront our fellow inhabitants on an earth grown both smaller and more vulnerable as a result of industrial man's abuse of his habitat.

Critics of technological excesses are wont to stress humanistic values and argue that the answer to the problems arising from these excesses cannot be found in technology or science but must come from man's ability to choose wisely. As Barry Commoner has stated:

Despite their origin in scientific knowledge and technological achievements (and failures), the issues created by the advance of science can only be resolved by moral judgement and political choice.¹

To those who maintain that the modern world is dominated by all-pervasive technological systems,² these critics counter with accusations of technological determinism and maintain that human choice will remain paramount as long as man remains a political animal.³

Can mankind truly exercise "from choice"? A true determinist—whether technological or environmental—would say absolutely "no" in all cases. Critics of determinism—a category encompassing virtually all

¹ As will be evident throughout this study, the writer—although convinced of the wisdom inherent in the ecological perspective as a conceptual framework—is not an advocate of the normative one-worldism posited by the Sprouts.
³ Quincy Wright, "Modern Technology and the World Order" in William F. Ogburn (ed.), Technology and International Relations (Chicago, 1949), p. 177 was an early advocate of this position.
social scientists—will answer in the affirmative. Does the ecological approach commit one to a view of environmental determinism? The answer to that question must remain an evasive "yes and no". This is the possibilist's answer. The possibilist admits the capacity of mankind to alter the physical environment to suit our needs based upon political and social choices. However, the possibilist also maintains that in ultimate terms the earth's finity sets limits upon what man can achieve. The Sprouts argue with this version of environmental possibilism. They say:

In the possibilist theory, the issue of choice is bypassed. . . . In the possibilist hypothesis, environmental limitations on accomplishment are assumed to be discoverable.

However, the issue of choice does not have to be bypassed. Choice is very important. Humanistic values hold the key to man's management of mechanistic excesses. However, there are physical limits of a finite earth beyond which mere choice cannot achieve desired and inflexible aims. The crucial aspect of such limits is their flexibility. They are limits which respond to cultural man's pressures and goals. Thus, mankind's past modifications of its aims has permitted man to evolve means for coping with these flexible limits. Contrary to the Sprouts, it is not assumed that such limits can be discovered, at least not before they are confronted. This is precisely the danger inherent in man's blind challenge of such limits. We may not fully comprehend the limits of the earth until it is too late.

Comprehension of the holistic character of the earth is essential if man is to survive upon the earth. To attain that comprehension will require knowledge of and appreciation for the earth as man's habitat. To

4 Richard and Patty Watson, Man and Nature (New York, 1969), p. 159, asked themselves the same question and answered "yes", but for different reasons: "In a sense it does, but then scientific knowledge of any sort is deterministic. Science rests on the principle that there is no effect without a cause and that from similar causes similar effects result."

5 The Watsons, Ibid., p. 160, concisely stated the possibilist viewpoint: "It is the physical environment that sets the possibilities for and the limitations of cultural development. Nature poses the problems for man, who is an animal that must live on earth. He must sustain himself with resources of the earth, and it is only within the range of potentialities presented by these resources that man can develop his culture."


7 The present variant of environmental determinism does not fit the Sprouts' pre-cast mold. It is, however, unlikely that this variant's validity will ever be tested by man. Rather, it is unlikely that man will ever know the results of such a test. Its proof will inherently coincide with the end of human cultures.
that end, the ecological perspective is vitally important. As Kenneth Boulding stated:

The ecological point of view . . . is perhaps the most fundamental thing we can teach anybody. . . . it has to become the basis of our educational system.\(^8\)

With a great deal of effort the ecological perspective may serve to achieve the heretofore impossible unity of knowledge; the lack of which has proved such a hindrance to mankind’s accepting the notion of finitude.\(^9\) Such knowledge is a prerequisite to man’s developing the wisdom to appreciate his place in natural systems. This task will be difficult, but not impossible for as Tuan Yi-fu has observed: “beneath the veneer of scientific sophistication, modern man still tends to think of nature in . . . elemental categories. . . . The desire to bring nature and man’s world into a coherent system is widespread.”\(^10\) Not only is it “widespread”, it is essential.

The contradictory relationship between man’s need to devise social means for living in harmony with natural processes and the increasingly nature-destructive tendencies of many contemporary societies is seemingly irresolvable. It is in this sense that conservation has been characterized as “the art of the impossible”.\(^11\) This paraphrase of the well-known description of politics as “the art of the possible” is very pertinent to mankind’s ecopolitical problems. In dealing with a Malthusian ecopolitical future, politics—operating within the possibilist framework of the ecological perspective—is a way to achieve one’s ends in an otherwise impossible situation. That is, if political man adjusts his social goals to conform with emergent ecopolitical realities, he may be able to cope with Malthusian issues. For as Frank Lorimer stated, “The real question is . . . not ‘What will happen?’ but ‘When, how, and under what conditions?’.”\(^12\)

\(^8\) Ecopolitics is a rubric denoting political man’s interaction with and dependence upon a homeostatic ecosphere.


As political man looks to the future he is confronted with four basic policy alternatives. In essence these alternatives are: (1) do nothing, (2) protectionism-isolationism, (3) international cooperation, and (4) international condominium. Of these four, the first—the “do-nothing” or “muddling through” alternative may be quickly discarded. This alternative, implying a lack of overall direction and mixture of laissez faire disjointed approaches, is the very process which has brought the world to its present sad state. To continue to follow this path, whether by conscious choice or abject neglect, is a prescription for catastrophic confrontation with a Malthusian future.

Alternative number three—international cooperation—remains the choice of many people. If, as the Sprouts and others maintain, the people of the world can be sufficiently aroused by the ecological threat their activities pose to their earthly habitat to join together in a common quest for means to cope with the issues, then this alternative remains open. However, the prospects for this alternative are depressingly bleak. One may continue to hope that this alternative may yet be realized, but if one is to remain pragmatically attuned to contemporary political reality, it must be recognized that the other two alternatives are far more likely.

Of the other two alternatives, number four—international condominium—is a more hard-nosed cousin of idealistic cooperation. The other, protectionism-isolationism, is the most self-centered of the alternatives. In a world of heightening Malthusian shortages, both of these alternatives raise the spectre of renewed Social Darwinism. The works of Herbert Spencer and W. G. Sumner are not read much any more. Yet in an era of growing international competition, notions of social supremacy and legitimately greater social needs are quite likely to re-emerge as rationales for resource-grasping policies.

The most extreme form of Social Darwinism is proffered by the second alternative—protectionism-isolationism. This alternative visualizes the “have” nations withdrawing behind their shell of wealth and looking after their own needs. Both super-powers are presently partial adherents to such a policy. The Soviet Union, despite its internationalist rhetoric, is basically oriented toward economic autarky supporting a closed social system. With its vast reserves of resources and relatively small population, the Soviet Union is well positioned for adoption of this alternative. Until recently this was less true of the United States. Particularly since World War Two, foreign trade in raw and finished materials and assistance in economic development have made the United States an active participant in the world’s economy. However, political
reverses abroad, domestic problems, and concerns arising from the so-called energy crisis have led the United States to once again look inward.\textsuperscript{13} The United States is in danger of following the protectionist-isolationist alternative. Garrett Hardin, in an editorial in \textit{Science} entitled "The Survival of Nations and Civilizations", spoke for the neo-isolationist's view of future realism when he stated:

Every day we (\textit{i.e.}, Americans) are a smaller minority. We are increasing at only one percent a year; the rest of the world increases twice as fast. By the year 2000, one person in twenty-four will be an American; in one hundred years only one in forty-six . . . If the world is one great commons, in which all food is shared equally, then we are lost. Those who breed faster will replace the rest . . . In the absence of breeding control a policy of 'one mouth one meal' ultimately produces one totally miserable world. In a less than perfect world, the allocation of rights based on territory must be defended if a ruinous breeding race is to be avoided. It is unlikely that civilization and dignity can survive everywhere; but better in a few places than in none. Fortunate minorities must act as the trustees of a civilization that is threatened by uninformed good intentions.\textsuperscript{14}

Such a view of the future may be unpleasant, but it most certainly is not unthinkable. This is international Social Darwinism carried to its logical conclusion. Critics may call it "barbarism",\textsuperscript{15} but that does not reduce its possibility, for, as Harold Lasswell said, his garrison-state hypothesis seems more likely now than ever.\textsuperscript{16}

The protectionism-isolationism alternative is referred to above as a "danger" because, although it might well suffice for the few in the short-run, in the long-run it is a prescription for disaster. The ecopolitical problems of the world are not unlike cancers. The earth is an interdependent unit. It is unreasonable to expect cancerous growth to devour all but privileged enclaves. No, in time, the whole of the earth would succumb. To prevent this fate, alternative number four is suggested here as viable.

\textsuperscript{13} This inward-looking posture was perhaps best expressed in Robert W. Tucker, \textit{A New Isolationism, Threat or Promise?} (New York, 1972). Plans such as that presented in Carroll L. Wilson, "A Plan for Energy Independence" in \textit{Foreign Affairs}, July 1973, pp. 657-675, and favored by the Nixon administration as a way out of the energy "crisis" miss the point of world interdependency and also focus on an area—energy resources—which must be considered relatively easily solvable when contrasted with food resources.


Zibigniew Brzezinski has observed that there are two basic orientations toward world politics today: "power realists" and "planetary humanists". He differentiates between these contemporary categories and the older classifications of "realists" and "idealists" by noting that power realists now accept the idea of interdependence and many planetary humanists now favor change to the extent of advocating violence if necessary to achieve change. This distinction is instructive, but one must ask why it is necessary? Is it not possible to merge these orientations? The contention here is that it is, indeed, possible—via the fourth alternative. As noted above, the idea of an international condominium is simply a harsher variant of the more appealing alternative of international cooperation. It merges concerns for stability and for man's future on earth. Richard Falk, one of the United States' leading authorities on and advocate of international cooperation—who is nevertheless pessimistic about prospects for a "central solution", has said:

Whether such a central solution comes about primarily by consent or coercion, or as the alternative to rather than as the aftermath of catastrophe are among the great unanswered questions of our time.

Coercion is a loaded word, but its use is perhaps unavoidable in connection with any suggestion of world condominium. Environmentalists have frequently called for the universal adoption of an ecological ethic. The adoption of such an ethic is closely related to restraints. As Aldo Leopold noted:

An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing.

Implicit here is the view that mankind will have to surrender some of what it has considered its "rights" in payment of past-due ecological debts. That is, as Harrison Brown observed, the costs will be high:

When we examine all of the foreseeable difficulties which threaten the survival of industrial civilization, it is difficult to see

17 Zbigniew Brzezinski, "U. S. Foreign Policy: The Search for Focus" in Foreign Affairs, July 1973, pp. 712-713.
how the achievement of stability and the maintenance of individual liberty can be made compatible.20

The costs would be high under cooperative measures also. The difference in the alternative of condominium is that it would be imposed upon the world at large by a consortium of dominant powers. Relatively free political choice would be available only to the leadership of such powers. Others would, at best, have a supporting role. The disadvantages of this alternative in terms of loss of freedoms and imposition of harsh restrictions are only too obvious. Detractors from this alternative are plentiful.21 However, if thought of in terms of a commonly conceived of concert of powers—that is, initially cooperative and voluntary6—it is a pragmatic approach to the creation of an international system capable of achieving and maintaining an enforceable—if harsh—means of coping with a Malthusian future.22

Such a condominium of powers may well provide mankind with the means for its survival on earth. However, whether it or another alternative is eventually followed, the most important matter is that man find some means of dealing with Malthusian issues. In the past nations could, if “forced” by perceived circumstances, expand militarily and seek solace at the expense of their erstwhile neighbors. However, in the nuclear age these avenues are effectively closed to all but the most insignificant states. Moreover, such semi-primitive states with their more resilient characteristics are not likely to be the ones which will most severely confront future ecopolitical dilemmas. The nations that are large and technologically sophisticated enough to be vulnerable—a category within which the United States finds itself—will not, in the future, be able to follow paths formerly available to them in times of crisis. In short, these are the four broad foreign policy alternatives arrayed before

* One might consider it initially as world “con-federalism” rather than the world “federalism” implied by internationally cooperative schemes leading to world government.
22 For additional comments by the writer on the value of a condominium, see the “Correspondence” section of Foreign Affairs, Oct. 1973, pp. 181-183, including a reply by Earl C. Ravenal. In this regard, one might note that even the Sprouts—despite their preference for a cooperative international measure—recognized (Toward a Politics of the Planet Earth (New York, 1971), p. 46) that the U. N. was created with a Security Council meant to act as a “new concert of power” with representation in the General Assembly designed to make such domination “palatable” to the remaining countries.
the United States as it prepares to face a changed ecopolitical milieu. Despite the constraints of flexible environmental limits, man can and must make hard choices in the near future. We in the United States owe it to ourselves and to the future of mankind to choose our foreign policy options in this realm wisely. As we approach these choices we would do well to bear in mind the words of Teilhard de Chardin:

The future of the earth is in our hands.
How shall we decide? 23