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Abandon Environmentalism for the Sake of the Revolution

I begin with full disclosure: David Orr is a colleague and friend, and I would not be ashamed to ride in his Ford pickup or share with him a fine merlot. I know too, from his many writings, that he likes lists, so it is no surprise to find five proposed laws with corollaries that sum up what he has learned about the preservation of biological diversity. They are mostly accurate, appropriately dismal, and seriously challenging for those of us living in a world shaped by assumptions, perspectives, and optimisms that no longer hold, that may never have held, and that are now causing more harm than good.

Orr's Laws call for an honest appraisal of thermodynamic, ecosystemic, and humanistic limits. They tacitly reject the rosy laws of an earlier revolutionary time when earthly sources and sinks were considered too plentiful to worry about, when human reason was championed as sufficient to rule the unruly world, and when human liberty and happiness were inextricably linked to a doomsday-like economic system that could only succeed by growing continuously and by requiring an indebted and tireless workforce.

I am referring to what is collectively called the scientific, political, and industrial revolutions that began in seventeenth century Europe, and that continue mostly unabated today around the world. Never mind that this world view has yet to incorporate nineteenth and twentieth century discoveries in evolution and in thermo and ecosystem dynamics. Perhaps we should not expect rapid social change in a world where most

people still describe the sun as rising and setting (and actually feel a motion falsely described by their world view), and prefer mostly false beliefs that are optimistic and exciting to the honest but downgraded truths of the sort expressed in Orr's Laws.

But it is in their expression that, for me, Orr's Laws go off the rails. Just because the current system settings and axioms are wrongheaded and dangerous does not mean they need to be replaced with pessimistic, limiting, you-can-pay-now or you-can-pay-later alternatives, even if these alternatives are inescapably accurate. Orr's Laws, like so much of environmentalism, are too often too many dire warnings that don't come true, don't come true fast enough, are true but hard to measure or grasp, or are made to sound false by better financed special interests or the Julian Simons and Bjorn Lomborgs of the world. This is the problem of environmentalism—too much truth and not enough marketing at the very intersection between two world views, one that is not working and one that is not yet formed, when both truth and marketing are required.

Is this propensity of environmentalists to paint grim pictures a function of not getting enough attention in the first place? Imagine a cultural toolbox made up of all the tools required to create, change, and improve the world in which we live. Some of the tools are essential and get used all the time: hammer, saw, level, screwdriver, knife, and tape measure (analogous, for example, to engineering, economics, science, and politics). Other tools get used not

so much, and only for special jobs: chisel, rasp, Allen wrench, and plane (arts, literature, philosophy, and spirituality).

So where does environmentalism fit in? Unfortunately, I think it is best represented by the safety glasses in the cultural toolbox. Yes, safety glasses are important, and should be worn lest bad things happen, but they're mostly optional, and workers can always rationalize them away "this one time." And who thinks about them very often in the first place? They don't do any useful work; they very often slow down the work or make it more costly; and they frequently limit the worker's dexterity and vision, actually making the work more dangerous. Not surprisingly, when the safety glasses get together or write their books, they bemoan the fact that they are rarely worn or heeded. They pronounce warnings that bad things will happen to those who fail to wear them. Such guilt trips and the lack of any perceived world building are not very exciting to the other members of the toolbox or to the other tools at large. You get the point.

What to do? Orr is right to throw politics and spirituality into the scientific mix. But I think we need a more drastic approach. Our best chance for creating effective and lasting change that accommodates evolutionary biology, the second law of thermodynamics, and ecosystem dynamics is to abandon environmentalism altogether. Environmentalism needs to become invisible in the larger social fabric and to hitch a ride on the larger movements, institutions, and

concepts that do most of the heavy lifting in the world. In this invisibility guise it will help to prepare the ground for the revolution—or revolutions—in one or more of the larger systems. But it will not be an environmental revolution.

This world-view revolution will need new foundational axioms that reconceive and rehabilitate principles, metrics, and relationships that are already well known and established in the central cultural operating systems. And like their revolutionary predecessors, the new systems will have to motivate and make sense—or at least be attractive—to folks who have heretofore known only what these new systems reject as dangerous and untenable. These replacement systems will also have to be easily started and capable of running on their own. And they will have to quickly create new goods and services that replace what came before with such an intensity and of such high quality that the pub-

lic will demand the new goods and services, and quickly (within a half century) forget about the old goods and services. In short, the new systems will have to speak less about impending doom, limits, ignorance, and social and moral responsibilities and more about social, moral, and economic opportunities and the social and ecosystem goods that will result.

The earlier revolutions overthrew oppressive and limiting world views, but they did it with optimism, excitement, and daring. Environmentalism is short on all three. Let us not confuse our relentless and justified criticisms of the systems in need of overthrowing with the need for an alternative world view that can be embraced and pursued by the world's inhabitants. Earlier revolutionaries did not risk their own lives, or inspire others to charge the well-defended ramparts, simply to overthrow a dysfunctional system in favor of one that trumpets a new age of limits and pessimisms.

Simply put, if environmentalism wants to make a contribution to lasting change, it will need to lower its voice; become quietly subversive; gain entrée into larger social systems; wait for opportunities to contribute; be ready with positive, forward-looking alternatives; hope for favorable conditions for revolutionary change; and otherwise bide its time.

This advice probably sounds too passive and too much like throwing in the towel. But almost 150 years—beginning with Thoreau—of lectures, dire warnings, hand wringing, and now Orr's Laws have brought us little by way of the big changes nearly all of us agree must soon occur. I think it is time we try another tack, for the sake of the revolution. Pass the merlot.

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