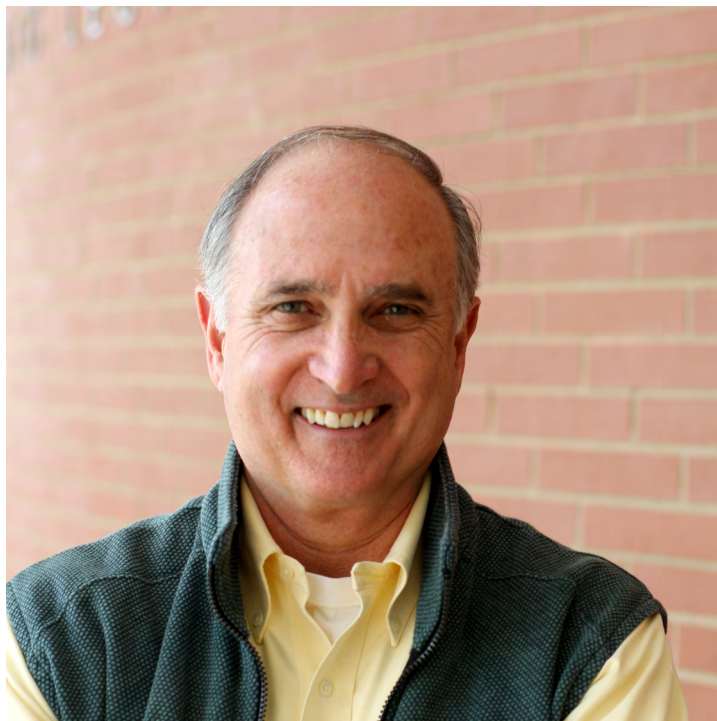


THE (MISSING) POLITICS IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION



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by David W. Orr

David Orr suggests that environmentalist and peace educators must teach civics, law, government, and political history to deeply cultivate an understanding of the influences and policies that create and perpetuate environmental destruction and humanitarian crises. Citizens, especially students, must comprehend the political forces and the public interests that have created the current destabilization of our environment and human community and must become civically and politically engaged to affect actual policy change.

"It's very hard to see us fixing the climate until we fix our democracy." – James Hansen

For all of our successes, and they are many, and for all of our considerable efforts, and they are admirable, humankind is losing the effort to save a decently habitable planet. The immediate causes include rapid climate destabilization, ocean acidification, and the loss of biodiversity that are all driven by the expanding human footprint. With determination and effort, some damage is repairable in a timescale that matters, but much of it is irreversible. As much as one wishes it were otherwise, it is not.

The reflections below are to my colleagues in environmental and sustainability education who as Aldo Leopold wrote, "live alone in a world of wounds . . . that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise" (165). Since those words were written in the 1940s, we have done many good things, but in total they do not match the scope, scale, and urgency of the challenges we presently face and that our progeny will confront through the centuries of the "long emergency." There are many reasons for this, beginning with the massive size and duration of the "environmental problem." But most important is our tendency to overlook the inconvenient reality that the use and disposition of land, air, water, forests, oceans, minerals, energy, and atmosphere are inevitably political, having to do with "who gets what, when and how." With notable exceptions, however, we avoided politics and giving offense in a highly polarized time, but now things are fast coming undone and time for correction is very short. To wit.

If today is a typical day in our nation's capital, the dismantling of the Environmental Protection Agency and our collective capacity to protect our air, water, lands, biota, climate, and health will proceed apace, but mostly out of sight. Our common heritage of lands, parks, national monuments, and unique ecosystems will decline further. Today the interests of the wealthiest 1% will advance while those of the bottom 90% will recede. Today the causes of peace and justice will languish, those of militarism and violence will expand. No inspiring truth or ideal will be forthcoming from the White House to dilute the rampant greed, lies, megalomania, and criminality that infect our politics, now more than ever in our history. Suffering will be imposed on the most vulnerable citizens with cold indifference; our duties and obligations to prevent future suffering and injustice will be ignored in silence. Painstakingly assembled over two centuries, the institutions and norms of democratic governance will be further debased behind closed doors. Our common wealth is up for sale; a tsunami of lies and "dark" money threatens to drown what remains of the public interest.

None of this is particularly new and none of it is accidental. It is rather the result of decades of effort to reshape the American political system to the advantage of corporations and the wealthy. To do that, it was necessary to undermine venerable institutions and subvert our public language and our common understanding of facts and reality. Not to put too fine a point on recent history, it was a decades-long coup but without tanks in the streets or colonels with dark glasses. How did it happen?

I

One answer is that we were not paying attention when we might have helped to move our politics in a better direction. While we were writing brilliant articles and books, they were taking over school boards and city councils. While we were holding great conferences in beautiful places, they were taking over state legislatures and governors' offices. While we were doing science, they were doing the politics of taking over Congress, the Senate, the court system, and learning the arts of manipulation by television, radio, internet, and social media. While we were growing school gardens and talking about exciting possibilities for renewable energy and ecological agriculture, they were steadily forcing our politics to the right and taking over the party of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Eisenhower. While we were getting in touch with our inner selves, they were staffing up on K Street. While we were trying to make peace with capitalism, they were at Davos advancing the cause of neoliberalism and working to make the rich much richer and the poor that much poorer. While we were trying to be bipartisan, they were doing zero-sum politics, that is to say heads they win, tails we lose. While we were most often right about the issues, they were taking power. While we were trying to be reasonable, they were cultivating and exploiting resentment. While we were reading Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, they were marinating in the bizarre philosophy of Ayn Rand. And, perhaps most important, while we were doing our eco-thing, Richmond attorney and future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell was drafting the memo to the US Chamber of Commerce (1971) that became the battle plan for a massive corporate counter attack against environmentalism and progressive movements. In the fevered politics of those turbulent years, his memo sparked creation of the organizations charged with legitimizing and justifying the politics of a new era of robber barons.

Who are they? Whatever else they may be, they are not conservatives in the mold of Edmund Burke or Richard Weaver or even Barry Goldwater. Many are descendants of the far-right of American politics, with roots in the South with its long history of opposition to the Federal government as a countervailing force to systems of racial discrimination and unbridled corporate power. Their agenda includes a hodge-podge of ideas such as "getting government off our backs" (but leaving predatory corporations there), ending Social Security, further enlarging the military, terminating a woman's right to control her own body, eliminating environmental protections, defunding social programs, ending restrictions on gun ownership, freedom from public obligations, and always more tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. In other words, they don't like government regulations, taxes, assertive women and minorities, national forests, public parks, the Postal Service, science, fact-checkers, the media, controls on gun ownership, and, of course, "liberals." They include neo-Nazis, white supremacists, internet trolls, Tea Partiers, climate change deniers, extreme evangelicals, FOX News true believers, Limbaugh "ditto-heads," Ayn Rand libertarians, free market ideologues, and some well-heeled people who really ought to know better. Disproportionately, they're angry white guys, and their enablers aren't as angry but are adept opportunists who know how to make money from those who are. They are well armed, noisy, and increasingly well organized. They are inclined to the kind of self-righteousness that justifies means by the unquestioned self-anointed holiness of the ends. They now control what remains of the Republican party that once stood for the kind of conservatism that included a commitment to fiscal integrity, personal probity, a regard for facts, public decency, balanced budgets, common sense, and the kind of patriotism that could cost you something. Donald Trump gave voice to their inchoate rage and created a world-class model of a *kakistocracy*, an ancient Greek word that means government run by the worst, least qualified, and most unscrupulous. They are a minority but an intense, highly organized, and well-funded minority and sometimes that is all it takes to cause political havoc. On the eve of the Nazi takeover in 1933, for example, only 22% of Germans were members of the Nazi Party.

"We," on the other hand, are mostly Democrats, liberals, and self-described progressives dispersed across multiple overlapping issues. We don't like polarization or hardball politics, or say we don't. We like to "get to yes" and cost-free "win-win" solutions. We listen to National Public Radio, get our news from MSNBC and *The New York Times*. We read publications like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*. We have college degrees. We are geographically confined to reservations in the Northeast and West Coast and a few urban enclaves and college towns in between. We

are more likely to live in cities and work in professions. We talk at length about listening to “them” with greater empathy, feeling their pain, understanding where they’re coming from, etc. Too often, we are analytical, boring, and long-winded. We talk in footnotes and are a poor match for those who recite well-rehearsed talking points delivered early each morning by a disciplined media machine.

Nonetheless, we can be very proud of the intellectual capital and knowledge we progressive environmentalists built over many decades. We wrote remarkably good books on environmental education, sustainability, justice, environmental economics, renewable energy, climate change, sustainable agriculture, and greening cities. Our analysis of complex policy issues was, by and large, very good. In a rational country, we would be winning in a landslide. Alas, history and human nature are seldom so simple. The spoils go to the winners, not always to those who were merely right about the issues. “They” now hold the power that runs the country and is running it into the ground. They control the weapons that could destroy civilization. They control policies affecting taxation and spending, healthcare, regulation, banks, the distribution of wealth, education, public health, military spending, war and peace, media, law enforcement, and the environment that are destroying the foundations of democracy. And for the most part, they are proudly ignorant of ecology and Earth systems science.

This is a slight caricature, but only slightly. The line separating “us” from “them” is admittedly blurry and so I will qualify my words. Sometimes people change their opinions, reason breaks through the fog of ideology, and sinners repent. Sometimes it is possible to find the holy grail of common ground, and there are conversions on the road to Damascus. Sometimes people backslide to a more reasonable place, but mostly people cling to their opinions and narratives like shipwrecked sailors clinging to flotsam on the high seas.

On the other side, some of us have worked on political campaigns and have taken on issues like climate change, but our hearts are in building green schools, designing cool cities, and creating models of a future with organic gardens and regenerative farms. All good and necessary things. We aimed to be decent and accommodating, while mostly avoiding the hard work of long-term political organizing, persuasion down at the truck stop, local politics, and the messy issues of governance and politics. In other words, we did the uncontroversial bottom-up things, but they seized the commanding heights of power and wealth.

II

The dominant fact of our time is the rapid decline in the vital signs of Earth and the growing possibility of “cascading system failures threatening basic necessities like food supply and electricity” and much more (Sengupta; Steffen et al.). For educators the question is what we can do to seriously and soon improve the human prospect, not just lament our peril. The overriding fact is that we know much more about the science of ecology than we do about the implications it poses for governance, law, and policy. As a result, we do not yet know how to translate ecology and Earth systems science into laws, regulations, public institutions, and economic arrangements with the resilience and durability necessary for human survival over the long haul. The upshot is that any adequate response to our predicament must begin with an understanding of political economy large enough to include ecology and Earth systems science and the organizational capacity to make it mainstream. (Perhaps like the Mont Pèlerin Society formed by Frederick Hayek, Milton Friedman, and others in advancing the cause of neoliberalism in the decades after World War II, only better thought out, much faster, and more inclusive. See Mirowski & Dieter Plehwe; Burgin.)

As noted above, all environmental and sustainability issues, from local to global, are unavoidably political, having to do with “who gets what, when and how.” The “who” includes all of those qualified as citizens, including those unborn but presently excluded from our moral community. “What” includes everything taken from nature that is transformed into wealth and the ecological processes that recycle the resulting waste or consign it to land, oceans, and atmosphere. The “how” of politics are the rules that govern inclusion, exclusion, political processes, and the allocation of power. For citizens there is no way to be apolitical. To the extent that we stand aloof from politics, we give tacit assent to the forces that are destroying the habitability of the Earth. For educators the conclusion is

For educators the conclusion is straightforward: Politics, policy, and political philosophy should feature in the core of environmental and sustainability education. Otherwise, we leave our students clueless, inarticulate, and adrift in the political turmoil that is engulfing the world and impairing our common future. We do not have an environmental crisis as much as a political crisis that is the sum total of our failures of foresight, empathy, and morality in the conduct of our public business.

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The first and most mundane has to do with governance. The emergence of environmental law and regulation in the years from 1969 to 1980 presaged the dawn of a new beginning between humankind and the natural world. The signal accomplishments included the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), creation of the Council on Environmental Quality, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Wilderness Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Scenic and the Wild Rivers Act, and by executive order, formation of the Environmental Protection Agency. These achievements reflected a consensus among Democrats and Republicans that created the legal foundation for present-day environmental policy that is now under assault by the Trump administration.

As important as they were, however, environmental laws and regulations of that era left much undone. They did not confront larger issues such as climate change, energy policy, land use, technological change, and the overall scale of the economy that were in various ways left to the market. As a result, the goal to grow the economy on one hand conflicts with protecting the environment on the other. The Environmental Protection Agency, however, still has no "organic statute" to resolve those competing ends and to clarify its mission and set priorities. The abolition of the Office of Technology Assessment in 1994 crippled the federal capacity to foresee technological problems, which is equivalent to turning the headlights off on a dark night while traveling at a high rate of speed on a winding road. Environmental regulation, such as it is, occurs under the commerce clause of the Constitution – an awkward arrangement at best. Moreover, deeper issues having to do with the recalibration of governance with the holistic and long-term ecological systems that require foresight and a systems thinking were left unresolved in the ongoing conflict between public and private rights. It is not clear whether or how a democratic society might resolve such issues.

The second challenge, then, has to do with the viability of democracy. We simply do not know whether democracy as practiced today will rise to the challenge of protecting and restoring the ecosphere.¹ Biologist Garrett Hardin had his doubts. In a famous essay in *Science* (1968), he wrote that the only way to avoid tragedy in the use of common property resources was "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon." Economist Robert Heilbroner in *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (1974) arrived at the same conclusion, writing, "I not only predict but I prescribe a centralization of power as the only means by which our threatened and dangerous civilization will make way for its successor" (175).

¹ The future of democracy has always been in question. Among its critics, Plato regarded it a prelude to tyranny. Aristotle was not much more sanguine. The founding fathers of our Republic were wary of it. John Adams believed that democracies always end by committing suicide. James Madison believed that, with luck, democracy in America might last a century. English writer E. M. Forster could give it only two cheers, H. L. Mencken none at all, believing people incorrigibly stupid. Economist Joseph Schumpeter likewise thought voters became dumber when they entered the political arena. Robert Dahl, perhaps the greatest student of democracy in the twentieth century once described himself as a "pessimist" about its future. Winston Churchill captured our predicament in his often-quoted observation that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others ever tried. In short, democracy is everywhere and always a wager that enough people would know enough and care enough and be wise enough to participate honorably and well in the conduct of the public business.

In 1977, political scientist William Ophuls argued, as did the authors of *The Limits to Growth* (1972), that the capacity of Earth to supply resources and process our wastes is constrained by what he called “ecological scarcity,” by which he meant the sum total of all environmental limits. From that perspective, he drew conclusions about politics and governance similar to those of Hardin and Heilbroner. “Democracy as we know it,” he wrote, “cannot conceivably survive [because] ecological scarcity . . . engender(s) overwhelming pressures toward political systems that are frankly authoritarian” (Ophuls 200, 216). The problem of democracy is the incompatibility of the freedom “to behave in a selfish, greedy, and quarrelsome fashion” and the imperative to discipline our appetites in order to avoid ecological scarcity. The epigraph to his book, taken from a letter written by Edmund Burke in 1791, summarizes our predicament:

men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites . . . society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without . . . men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

Burke’s conservatism required a kind of forbearance alien to citizens in mass consumption societies conditioned to be dependable and dependent consumers yearning for more. Well-conditioned consumers, however, are not likely to go quietly and willingly into the night of ecological frugality and self-denial.

The third challenge is posed by the inevitable limits to the growth economy. The fact is that we have never been as rich as we assumed because we off-loaded costs and risks on others in some distant place or on future generations in the form of resource scarcity, toxicity, biotic impoverishment, climate instability, conflict, poverty, disease, and wrecked lives. The extractive industries have been highly profitable mostly to the extent they did not pay the full costs for the damage they inflicted. The larger point is that, sooner or later, the laws of entropy will bring economic growth to an end. We cannot know exactly how it will occur or whether it will occur by choice or by necessity, but we do know that when it does, it will threaten social stability in direct proportion to the inequality of distribution and the accumulation of past grievances. We could pretend otherwise as long as enough people believed the myth that a rising tide would lift their particular boat. When the economy shudders to a halt and the belief in the miracle of endless economic growth vanishes, however, inequality will drive resentment, things will come undone, and the pitchforks will come out.

Unless, that is, technological developments allow us to make an end run around ecological scarcity and keep the party going, which raises a fourth challenge. The core idea is that technological breakthroughs create jobs, surmount ecological limits, cycle all wastes back into “food,” and otherwise allow us to ignore growing income disparities. Salvation by superior gadgetry and better design requires no messy politics and unsolvable dilemmas, only problems solvable with more research and smarter policy. Technology, however, has its own unanticipated effects and sometimes “bites back.” It arrives usually as wonders and miracles; only later do we discover a darker side. Smart phones, for example, useful for communicating and providing access to information, also surveil, manipulate, and addict. Starting as idealistic enterprises aiming to “do no evil,” companies such as Facebook, Amazon, and Google morphed into something wholly different, dedicated to moving fast and breaking things, devil and internet trolls take the hindmost. The idealism of founders gives way to profit-making, the temptations of power, and the unanticipated effects of complex systems operating in the dark beyond a manageable scale. If we have a philosophy of technology, it is more akin to cheerleading or just resignation to the inevitable, than to critical thinking and careful public policy. Our students, notably those from STEM programs, often graduate as technological fundamentalists unable to ask basic questions such as “what else does it do?” The fact is that we do not buy a technology, but rather we buy into a larger system of which a particular device is only a small part. The larger system that sells us smart phones and automobiles alike includes their extractive industries, production facilities, history of exploitation and pollution, effects on human health and social cohesion, land use, politics, lobbyists, political power, biodiversity, and so forth. We stand at the threshold of “super-intelligence” and robots that will be vastly more intelligent than humans

and in ways that we will not comprehend. Regardless, robots are being deployed to battlefields and to domestic police departments with consequences that at best are troubling. The advent of a dangerous new era is coming without much public discussion or awareness of the perils ahead. In the latter category, it is entirely possible that we will be displaced by artificial intelligence in some form or other. If so, they or it may consider us as rather stupid, disposable inconvenience.

A fifth challenge is the obvious need to expand our reach to applied professional fields such as engineering, medicine, business, finance, economics, and law, not as curricular add-ons but as a fundamental rethinking of applied disciplines in light of what is known about ecological interdependence. Much of what presently passes for professional education results in what Robert Jackall describes as “an ethos of organized irresponsibility and recklessness that has become the disquieting hallmark of our times” (240; see also Schmidt, particularly his description of the “radical professional,” 265–280). The result is a narrowing gap between licensed professional behavior and ecological mischief that undermines the long-term prospects for humanity. The cure, among other things, will require us to ask larger and harder questions that lie beyond conventional paradigms, disciplines, and modes of thought pervasive in higher education.

III

Sitting quietly in the ruins of the Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg, Germany, one can almost hear the echoes of Adolf Hitler’s carefully staged harangues and the responding shouts of 100,000 followers who were about to be fed into the slaughterhouse of World War II. It all seems so distant and yet so current. How did the pastoral Germany of Kant and Goethe descend to that of Hitler and Himmler? How did great universities and scientific institutions succumb so easily to Nazism? Where was the resistance, particularly from churches, unions, and civic organizations? The transformation happened quickly (mostly between 1928 and 1934) nearly eighty years ago and the infection has not died out yet.

Erika Mann, in *School for Barbarians* (1938) identified education as the key to the process by which the mind and language of a nation was subverted. “The Führer’s best bet lay,” she wrote, “from the very beginning, in the inexperience and easy credulity of youth. It was his ambition, as it must be any dictator’s, to take possession of that most fertile field for dictators: the country’s youth . . . All the power of the regime – all its cunning, its entire machine of propaganda and discipline – is directed to emphasize the program for German children” (19–20). The deflection of the mind and loyalties of a nation cannot be quickly undone. In the midst of the ruins of 1945 as the war was ending, historian and philologist, Victor Klemperer, described an encounter with a former student of his who said, “I still believe in HIM (Hitler), I really do” (122).

Our situation differs from that in Germany in the decades from the 1920s to 1945, but there are similarities as well. Yale historian Timothy Snyder argues, for example, that Hitler’s drive for *lebensraum* (i.e. land and resources) in Eastern Europe was an early version of the geopolitics of ecological scarcity and so a warning to us. For the readers of this journal, it is worth pondering the role of education in an age of unprecedented ecological deterioration, climate destabilization, inequality, and collapsing democratic institutions. The political immune system necessary to counter ignorance, fanaticism, gullibility, fear, misogyny, racism, and violence begins early on in classrooms where the young learn the basics rules of democracy: critical thinking, honesty, fairness, empathy, non-violence, and citizenship. None of this comes easily or naturally. Youth must be educated to be citizens of a democracy and to know the costs of careless and indifferent citizenship. They must also learn to see themselves as citizens of the community of life. As citizens of a democracy, they must understand the intimate relationship between democracy, human rights, dignity, justice, peace, and the human prospect and so must become knowledgeable about history, politics, the law and the workings of government. As citizens in the ecological community, they must understand ecology, natural cycles, and the web of life. As dual citizens of human and natural communities they must learn the value of the wider community and the common good that joins the interests of both. They must understand the intimate and reciprocal relationship between politics and our ecological prospects.

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Further, like those of Germany in the 1930s, schools, colleges, and universities are under attack by those who would subvert their purposes and narrow the focus to those subjects and curricula useful for jobs and careers in a growth-oriented economy and so non-threatening to the power of banks, corporations, and oligarchy. We must resist the temptation to shrink our courses and curricula in order to avoid controversial subjects. We must continue to teach connection and connectedness between peoples, humans and nature, our past and our future.

Environmental and sustainability education, heretofore, has been about everything but the politics that got us into our predicament and might yet be the path out of it. Our education, generally, and that pertaining to the environment in particular has mostly excluded civics and the role of politics and governance in our predicament. Often we did so to avoid controversy and the charge of partisan bias. In doing so, however, we were also being political—in effect supporting the status quo and the forces that prefer a passive and ecologically illiterate public; consumers not citizens. Alas, there is no way to be apolitical or non-political. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, there is no such thing as "cheap grace."

The upshot is this. The convergence of rapid climate destabilization and disintegrating democratic institutions is the historical context for our work as educators. I think it unlikely, as stated in the epigraph, that we will stabilize the climate without first repairing and strengthening democratic institutions. In both cases, as well as in other aspects of "the long emergency," the time for remedy is very short. Environmental and sustainability educators are, in effect, the first responders working with the rising generation to help guide the formation of their attitudes, capacities, loyalties, and affections. We should help them grow to become "radical professionals," people of irrepressible courage, creativity, joy, and humility dedicated to the causes of life, justice, truth, decency and democracy (Schmidt 265–280).

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