ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE

Toward a New Social Contract with the Earth

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To Strachan Donnelley
(1942–2008)
philosopher, outdoorsman,
conservationist, philanthropist,
teacher, friend

The sum total of harm inflicted on the world so far equals the ravages a world war would have left behind. . . . We so-called developed nations are no longer fighting among ourselves; together we are all turning against the world. We shall thus seek to conclude a peace treaty. . . . That means that we must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect; where knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery, nor would property and mastery imply their excremental results and origins.

—Michel Serres[1]

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Introduction

> The global economy today is overwhelming the ability of the earth to maintain life's abundance. We are getting something terribly wrong. At this critical time in history, we need to reorient ourselves in how we relate to each other and to the earth's wonders through the economy. We need a new mass movement that bears witness to a right way of living on our finite, life-giving planet.
>
> —Peter G. Brown and Geoffrey Garver[1]

> Solving our problems in the time we have available is not possible if all we do is change our technology. We will not arrest ecological decline or regain financial health without also introducing a different rhythm of work, consumption, and daily life, as well as alternation in a number of system-wide structures. We need an alternative economy, not just an alternative energy system.
>
> —Juliet Schor[2]

Our entire economic system is fundamentally dependent on 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 by-products into them. Today human economic activities worldwide are approaching those limits; in some cases they may have already exceeded them. We won't necessarily realize that we have exceeded them right away. The consequences may be delayed, subtle, and systemic

rather than clearly localized and visible. In short, our situation is insidious. Our excess does not lend itself to the age-old human ways of perceiving danger and taking appropriate, timely steps to protect against it. Our excess is the most grave danger we face.

In what he called a "land ethic," the noted American conservationist Aldo Leopold said that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. The land ethic is a call for human beings to be at peace with the planet, to live in a place without spoiling it, to accommodate our technology and ingenuity to the needs of other forms of life as well as to our own, to respect natural limits, and to keep ourselves within safe operating margins that do not violate planetary boundaries and tolerances.

Today organized economic activity all over the world is assaulting natural integrity, stability, and beauty, not always with results that are immediately apparent and not always intentionally, but pervasively, persistently, and with devastating cumulative effects. Humanity is at war with the planet. The time has come when all human minds, all over the world, must focus on a peace treaty to end this unwinnable war. In her 2014 study of climate change, Naomi Klein perceives that endless economic growth and consumption is a war we cannot win: "our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life."[3] And many of the world's leading scientists, who issued a sobering 2013 report on the state of knowledge and research on climate change, remind us that those now waging the war will not be its ultimate casualties:

> [A] set of actions exists with a good chance of averting "dangerous" climate change, if the actions begin now.

> However, we also know that time is running out. Unless a human "tipping point" is reached soon, with implementation of effective policy actions, large irreversible climate changes will become unavoidable. Our parent's generation did not know that their energy use would harm future generations and other life on the planet. If we do not change our course, we can only pretend that we did not know.[4]

I am writing this book with the following question in mind: If fifty years from now our children's children could ask us why we did what we are doing, what could we tell them? Pretending that we did not know is a shameful legacy.[5] Arguably, the actions of every generation pass on problems and burdens to the next, but the shadow on the future we are creating in our time may be historically unprecedented in its severity and in the disruption to all life on earth it will bring about. Yet, there is still time to redeem our generation and to lighten the burden that we shall bequeath to the next. In order to do so, the economic activities of humankind, most especially those in the most affluent societies, will require new aims, values, and modes of governance.[6] Achieving this future will require what I call an ecological social contract.

Nature as Stock and Sinkhole

Why is our collective activity, especially economic activity, colliding with ecological system limits and encroaching upon the safe operating margins of the planet? The reasons are many, but one key factor is that we think of the human realm as set apart from the rest of the world, and we believe that we can manipulate nature, engineering it as we see fit in accordance

with what we find meaningful and valuable. We seem blindly determined to pursue this viewpoint 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*. For the most part human economic activity is conducted as if nature were just a stock of raw materials and energy humans consume, and as if nature were an endless dumping ground (a "sink") into which we put our waste products. We extract useful, energy-rich materials from nature and excrete useless, degraded by-products into it. We take in and we throw away. Some of what we take in is running out, such as the once-teeming ocean fisheries, and the places where we throw things away are filling up and becoming overloaded, like leaching landfills or rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. In reality there is no such place as "away"; there is only a shifting of cost and burden to another place and to someone or something else.

The idea that the planet is a stock and a sinkhole is so widespread that it forms an unnoticed background assumption, not only of mainstream economic thought, but also of many habits and customs in our daily lives. In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis reminds us of how this was not always the case and of how dire a change in human orientation this kind of thinking represents. As Bill McKibben notes, the pope's teaching here is much more than a contribution to the climate debate. It is a "sweeping, radical, and highly persuasive critique of how we inhabit this planet—an ecological critique, yes, but also a moral, social, economic and spiritual commentary."[7]

Specifically, Francis ties together the question of human freedom with the question of setting limits and repositioning ourselves and our activities through a restructuring of our basic convictions and contentments. "Each age tends to have

only a meagre awareness of its own limitations," he writes. "It is possible that we do not grasp the gravity of the challenges now before us. . . . Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. . . . [W]e cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint." He then focuses on technology as a power that mediates the relationship between humans and nature and shapes how we inhabit the planet:

> The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject, who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth,

> which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.[8]

Despite the fact that this outlook is based on a lie, as the pope maintains, or on a serious form of misprision, our institutional system is set up to function well when we follow these habits unreflectively and when our behavior is deliberately strategic so that we stay within the rules of the system to pursue our own competitive advantage and individual or group self-interest. We go with the flow of economic activity, and we game the legal, market, and political systems to our own advantage (if we can), but always in ways that nonetheless sustain that flow. In this sense we are parties to a vast and tacit agreement, a social contract of consumption.

Of course, no one can think explicitly about all background assumptions or implicit perspectives all of the time. There are historical moments, however, when the tacit needs to become explicit, the pre-reflective should be revealed and reflected upon. We are in such a moment right now. The social contract of consumption can be reconstructed as a new ecological social contract. The current psychological and economic defaults of individualistic strategic thinking—namely, "What's in it for me?"—must be reset to relational ethical thinking that is mindful of human interdependence, sustaining the natural commons, and promoting the social common good, such as "What's in it for diverse, abundant, and resilient life?"

This book is a reflection on this reconstruction of the social contract and its prospects for success. I do not have a checklist of specific new policies and practices to offer. I am not the person to do that, and besides, there is a wealth of such technical knowledge and creative problem-solving ideas now

available.[9] What is also needed, but harder to find, are discussions of those fundamental ideas and concepts offering ethical justification for acting—and the democratic political will to act—on what science knows and what humanity, properly understood, requires. My contribution is to that discussion.

In the Western political tradition the ethical justification for doing what humanity requires has often been explored and shaped by using the metaphor of the "social contract." It helps us think about the following fact: We need others in order to survive, but we aspire to be free from the constraints and coercion others impose on us. The resolution of this conundrum is the autonomous agreement by each person to freedom-limiting common rules that fairly benefit all and unfairly burden none. Mutual agreement and promise-making (contracting) is the key to resolving the paradox that in order for the individual freedom of each to be sustained, it must be justly limited by all.

Reconciling order and freedom is an enduring challenge, never more so than today. The social contract idea can be a lens through which we better perceive our own situation and options. By exploring the terms of a relational, ecological agreement, we can reconcile desires that are unlimited with true powers and capabilities that are limited. Accordingly I have chosen the metaphor of the social contract as a point of entry. The destination is an ecological and relational understanding of "political economy," that is, the intersection of production, distribution, and governance, which represents the most consequential way that human beings relate to natural systems.

The pathway between this starting point and destination is straightforward. I begin in Part I with an interpretation of the idea of a social contract, the philosophical assumptions about human beings it rests on, and the normative functions it performs. I turn next to the idea of a political economy, which I regard as an institutional and practical manifestation

of the social contract: a consumptive social contract will give impetus to one form of political economy, an ecological contract will foster another.

With the basics of the distinction between the consumptive and the ecological contracts in place, in Part II I take up the theme of what I call "nature in humans." I do this with a series of reflections on the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the two thinkers who, in my estimation, most clearly show the political and moral potential inherent in the idea of a social contract. They did not use this idea merely to sketch out a minimalist modus vivendi. They got behind the idea of individuals' free submission to social order and common rules to explore a fundamental transformation in humans—from "natural" or wild freedom to "artificial" or domesticated obedience and orderly conduct. This is the achievement of a second nature in human beings, a political and moral nature, with motivations and capabilities for rational thinking that supersede their first or pre-political and anarchical way of being. In pursuing this, Hobbes and Rousseau importantly diverged: Hobbes laid important foundations for what later became the consumptive social contract, with his notions of competitive individualism driven by unlimited desire. For his part, Rousseau glimpsed the shape of a new ecological social contract with his insights into the dynamic and co-evolving connection between nature, culture (symbolic orders of meaning), and the human mind.

From the theme of nature in humans I turn in Part III to the activities of humans in (and on) nature. I begin with a discussion of the aspects of human action and agency that are key to making a transition to a new social order based on an ecological vision and conscience. With the differences between the consumptive social contract and the ecological social contract in place, I next explore more deeply what I take to be the

key provisions or terms of the ecological social contract. These terms are: (1) creating a system of wealth that moves beyond affluence and scarcity to plenitude and frugality; (2) creating a system of property that moves beyond commodities to commons; (3) creating a system of freedom or liberty that moves beyond noninterference and independent self-sufficiency to relationality and interdependence; and (4) creating a system of citizenship that moves beyond self-interested advantage to trusteeship for right relationship and right recognition.

The sphere of right, or justice, as I understand it, includes (1) the moral community of both human and nonhuman life and (2) the ecological commons—the symbiotic, interdependent systems, both natural and social, upon which human being and becoming depend.

In Part IV I close with a discussion of how an ecological social contract can illuminate the global problem of climate change. This problem sets in relief the political and governance aspects of the idea of a social contract. A particular form of democracy—namely, interest group representative democracy—has heretofore been the political arm and twin brother of the social contract of consumption. Can effective and timely climate change governance succeed in a democracy fundamentally dependent on consumption and continuing economic growth? I think not. That leaves the alternatives of abandoning democratic governance in favor of some kind of ecological authoritarianism, on the one hand, or reconstructing democracy through the exercise of ecological citizenship and trusteeship, on the other. If we move into an ecological authoritarianism, we should do so with open eyes rather than with frightened hearts. For my part, I aspire to and defend the governance of an ecological democracy. But at the very least, I hope that this book will help us to think carefully about the choices and challenges we face.