

# UNCOMMON GROUND

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*Rethinking  
the Human Place  
in Nature*

*William Cronon, editor*

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## On the Search for a Root Cause: Essentialist Tendencies in Environmental Discourse

*Jeffrey C. Ellis*

If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers.

—Thomas Pynchon

IN THE FALL OF 1993 DR. SALLIE BALUNIAS, AN ASTRONOMER AT THE HARVARD-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, presented a paper at a climatology conference organized by the Scripps Institute in La Jolla, California. In her paper Balunias argued that a cyclical increase in solar radiation intensity corresponds with and might explain the pattern of global warming that has been of such great concern to scientists and environmentalists in recent years.

Her theory attracted the attention of the Global Climate Coalition, a lobbying organization representing energy companies and trade associations in Washington, D.C. The coalition approached Balunias about embarking on a media campaign to publicize her ideas. She agreed. A public relations firm was hired, and the astronomer toured the country espousing her claim that solar fluctuations might be causing the warming of the earth's atmosphere.

In response, environmental groups and scientists denounced Balunias's theory as biased and reasserted their claims that strong evidence indicated a direct correlation between the phenomenon of global warming and increased levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. A group of researchers published a report in *Science* that concluded that solar fluctuations are "too small to have had any significant effect on climate and cannot be responsible for any current global warming." James Hansen, director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies and longtime

investigator of global warming, admitted that solar phenomena might be a factor but argued that they were relatively insignificant compared to the impact of gases produced by humans.<sup>1</sup>

Whenever a problem or a crisis is identified, those concerned tend to seek out and identify the origins of the problem. The logic behind this search for a root cause or causes is compelling. Adequate solutions to a problem cannot be derived or implemented unless those solutions address the problem at its source. Different analyses of the root causes of any specific problem necessarily lead to different policy proposals, which can have profoundly different political and social implications. Disagreements over what constitute the origins of a problem are, understandably, often highly charged affairs.

The clash outlined above over the source of the global warming problem illustrates the particular importance of the debate over root causes to the politics of environmentalism. If Balunias is correct and the warming of the earth's atmosphere is being caused by solar fluctuations rather than by industrial and social practices, then there is little need to regulate and constrain those practices in order to slow down atmospheric change. Furthermore, if the sun itself is the source of one of the earth's most troubling environmental problems, not only is there little that can be done about it, but nature can once again be thought of as humanity's greatest enemy. From this perspective, nature is not something that needs protection and understanding; it is fickle, constantly threatening our existence, and therefore something against which we may justifiably employ all of our scientific and technological capabilities in order to survive.

Most people who consider themselves environmentalists might read about this conflict between the Harvard astronomer and the advocates of the carbon dioxide theory and conclude that this is just another us versus them story, with developmentalists employing the tried-and-true tactic of buying science to divert attention from the need to make difficult decisions. Though this may well be true in this instance, it is worth recognizing that the story also closely resembles the environmentalists versus themselves story so typical of the modern American environmental movement. Balunias and her sponsors can justifiably claim that they are as concerned as their critics about the environment and global warming and that they are motivated by a desire to attack the problem at its roots.

Seen from this perspective, the Balunias story illustrates the tendency for America's diverse environmental movement to engage in debates over the root cause or causes of environmental problems. These at times rancorous debates have been common features of environmental discourse in this country. They have contributed substantially to disagreements over strategy and goals among environmentalists and have served to undermine the possibility of building a more effective and broad-based environmental coalition. With environmental progress stalled as a result of growing public apathy

and the seeming intractability of global environmental problems, it is time to assess this tendency and evaluate its impact on the environmental movement.

On February 2, 1970, Barry Commoner appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and was identified in a feature story as the "Paul Revere of Ecology."<sup>2</sup> This was an appropriate appellation for the plant physiologist from Washington University, in St. Louis, Missouri, who had been active since the mid-1950s in sounding environmental alarms about radiation hazards, pesticides, phosphates, automobile exhaust, and other pollutants.

Commoner's concerns about the chemicalization and irradiation of the environment had originated in the early 1950s while he was investigating cellular processes in plants. During these investigations, he recognized that normal cellular functions were often impaired if cells were exposed to "free radicals," substances that contained unpaired electrons. At the same time, investigators also discovered that tobacco tars, many newly introduced petroleum-based products, and most irradiated materials were radical and carcinogenic.<sup>3</sup>

Commoner grew particularly alarmed when he realized that scientific advances in physics and chemistry were contributing to the proliferation of potentially hazardous substances before their biological consequences had been investigated and understood. He came to believe that this failure to assess the possible biological repercussions of scientific progress constituted a weakness "at the very heart of the scientific enterprise . . . [that] threaten[ed] the future of science and its usefulness to the nation and the world." This was the message that Commoner had expounded during the 1960s, most comprehensively in his book *Science and Survival*.<sup>4</sup>

Having dedicated himself to raising America's environmental consciousness in the years leading up to Earth Day 1970, Commoner felt it was time to reassess the environmental movement after that bellwether event. "Until now," he wrote, "most of us in the environmental movement have been chiefly concerned with providing the public with information that shows that there *is* an environmental crisis." Feeling that he and other environmentalists had at long last succeeded in proving that a "crisis existed," Commoner now believed it had become "necessary . . . to consider its causes, so that rational cures can be designed."<sup>5</sup>

In deciding to evaluate the origins of the environmental crisis, Commoner had a particular bone to pick. He wished to refute the claims being advanced by a cohort of American neo-Malthusians that the country's environmental problems were the direct result of unchecked population growth. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the leading gurus of the population-growth-is-the-problem school of environmentalism have been Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin. Ehrlich's 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, and Hardin's article of the same year, "The Tragedy of the Commons," have served as Bible and epistle for this branch of the environmental movement.<sup>6</sup>

Their work has been the most recent manifestation of a concern with pop-

ulation growth that began in the late eighteenth century, when the English clergyman Thomas Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. According to Malthus, because human populations increased geometrically while food production increased arithmetically, mankind would always be pushing the limits of available resources and therefore subject to famine, epidemic disease, and war. Versions of the Malthusian argument have resurfaced periodically ever since, particularly during periods of social upheaval and distress.<sup>7</sup>

Malthus's twentieth-century heirs have been more concerned with resource depletion than with the inability of productive capacity to keep pace with population growth. During the 1950s the American conservationists Fairfield Osborn and William Vogt became obsessed with the idea that population growth in "underdeveloped" countries threatened to deplete the world's resources. Interestingly, Vogt and Osborn failed to consider the fact that the 6 percent of the world's population that lived in the United States was consuming 30–50 percent of the world's resources. During the early Cold War years, it was apparently politically incorrect to criticize America's high standard of living.<sup>8</sup>

Vogt and Osborn were instead concerned about the impracticality of basing U.S. foreign policy on the assumption that the best means of halting the spread of communism was to extend the American way of life to the Third World. This could not be done, they warned, unless the United States also moved quickly to check population growth in those regions as well. In the 1960s Malthusians began to worry that population growth had gotten out of hand in the United States, too, and was the ultimate source of the country's mounting environmental problems.

In December 1970, at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Barry Commoner denounced the Malthusian argument in general and personally confronted Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin, who were appearing on the same panel with him. "Saying that none of our pollution problems can be solved without getting at population first," he argued, "is a copout of the worst kind."<sup>9</sup>

Commoner continued his criticisms of the neo-Malthusians in the year that followed. In April he published "The Causes of Pollution" in *Environment*, a journal he had begun in the late 1950s under the auspices of the Greater St. Louis Committee on Nuclear Information. In this article he identified Ehrlich as one of those observers who "have blamed the environmental crisis on overpopulation." Commoner was particularly troubled by what he saw as Ehrlich's reliance on a simple mathematical equation for measuring the impact of population growth on the quality of the environment. While Commoner found Ehrlich's formula "self-evidently true," he believed that it was of little use for advancing "our understanding of the causes of environmental problems." Its greatest drawback, according to Commoner, was that it failed to explain why the amounts of various pollutants had increased by 200 to 1,000 percent between 1946 and 1968, while the

population had increased by only 43 percent during that same time period.<sup>10</sup>

Commoner held that a more "detailed guide" was needed to explain this discrepancy. On the basis of his own data and calculations, he concluded that "the rapid intensification of pollution" since World War II could not be "accounted for solely by concurrent increases . . . in population." Rather, the "most powerful cause of environmental pollution . . . appears to be the introduction of changes in technology, without due regard to their untoward effects on the environment."<sup>11</sup>

Commoner escalated his criticisms of Ehrlich and Hardin the following fall in *The Closing Circle*, his second book on the environmental crisis. In this work Commoner reiterated that it was imperative to "understand the origins of the environmental crisis" so that we could "begin to manage the huge undertaking of surviving it." Despite this imperative, Commoner was concerned with the many "confident explanations of the cause and cure of the crisis" that had proliferated since Earth Day. "Having spent some years in the effort simply to detect and describe the growing list of environmental problems," he wrote, "the identification of a single cause and cure seemed a rather bold step." Among those he singled out as most willing to take such a step, Commoner identified Ehrlich and Hardin for blaming pollution problems in the United States on increased population. They, like many other environmental prognosticators, were prone to "read into" the environmental crisis "whatever conclusions their own beliefs . . . suggested."<sup>12</sup>

Even more disturbing for Commoner were the social and political implications of a narrow focus on population as the root cause of the environmental crisis. Behind Hardin's proposals for dealing with population growth, Commoner found a "faintly masked 'barbarism'" that "would condemn most of the people of the world to the material level of the barbarian, and the rest, the 'fortunate minorities,' to the moral level of the barbarian." Similarly, Commoner felt that Ehrlich's suggestion that population be controlled "by compulsion if voluntary methods fail" amounted to a program for "political repression." Nor did he consider it "possible to disguise this ugly fact by notions such as 'mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.'" He feared that because of the neo-Malthusians' "highly publicized assertions, the notion that human survival is threatened merely by increase in numbers is now a fairly common one."<sup>13</sup>

Although Hardin refrained from directly addressing Commoner's accusations, Ehrlich responded with vehemence. He felt he had to deal with Commoner's "questionable assertions . . . before persistent and un rebutted repetition entrenches them in the public mind—if not the scientific literature." According to Ehrlich, Commoner had become an "ecological popularizer . . . zeal[ous] to 'prove' that all environmental problems are caused by faulty technology." In his misguided effort to develop this "one-dimensional" thesis, Commoner had resorted to "biased selection of data, unconventional definitions, numerical sleight of hand, and bad ecology." In addition to finding Commoner's position "unjustified and counterproduc-

tive," Ehrlich said Commoner was "deluding the public" by offering an "uncomplicated, socially comfortable, and hence, seductive" solution to the environmental crisis.<sup>14</sup>

In this debate Commoner and Ehrlich accused each other of oversimplifying the causes of the environmental crisis. Each felt that the other had adopted too narrow a focus and had reduced the complex environmental crisis to one essential cause, which had to be given priority over all other concerns. To a degree they were both correct, but, ironically, each had difficulty in recognizing that the criticisms he leveled at his opponent applied to his own analysis as well. Both paid lip service to the idea that there were "no monolithic solutions to the problems we face" and that there was a pressing need for a "deeper . . . understanding of the origins of the . . . crisis," and yet each felt compelled to oversimplify those origins and identify a central, most significant cause.<sup>15</sup>

This compulsion to essentialize the crisis can be traced in some detail in the works of both men. In the *Population Bomb* Ehrlich attributed America's "overcrowded highways, burgeoning slums, deteriorating school systems, rising crime rates, riots, and other related problems" to unchecked population increases. "The causal chain of the deterioration is easily followed to its source," he wrote. "Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticides . . . too little water, too much carbon dioxide—all can be traced easily to TOO MANY PEOPLE."<sup>16</sup>

Continuing down this narrow analytical road, Ehrlich then reduced population growth to the basic biological "urge to reproduce." This urge had been greatly compounded during the evolutionary process, according to Ehrlich. Because of the competitive need to develop a large brain, human babies became increasingly "helpless for a long period while their brains grew after birth." In order to "defend and care for her infant during its unusually long period of helplessness," the mother had to derive a means to entice "Papa [to] h[a]ng around." Although "the girls are still working on that problem, . . . an essential step," Ehrlich argued, "was to get rid of the short, well-defined breeding season characteristic of most mammals." For Ehrlich nothing less than "the year-round sexuality of the human female" explained the nation's environmental and social crises.<sup>17</sup>

Having reduced all of the world's problems to a single, essential cause, Ehrlich did not falter in his advocacy of an appropriate solution. "A general answer to the question, 'What needs to be done?' is simple. We must rapidly bring the world population under control, reducing the growth rate to zero or making it go negative." In order to develop and promote policies that would achieve this drastic curb on population growth, Ehrlich recommended the establishment of a federal department of population and the environment (DPE). Among other things, this new agency would "encourage more research on human sex determination, for if a simple method should be found to guarantee that first-born children were males, then population control problems . . . would be somewhat eased." The DPE would

also be charged with promoting sex for pleasure rather than reproduction.<sup>18</sup>

On the foreign policy front, the United States had to reverse its policies and withhold food aid from countries like India despite the opposition of "those in our government whose jobs depend on the willy-nilly spreading of American largess abroad, or by the assorted do-gooders who are deeply involved in the apparatus of international food charity." Those "underdeveloped" countries that were worth saving would be forced to adopt population control and resource development plans designed by the United States and, in order to get the required cooperation of Third World populations, Madison Avenue would be commissioned to propagandize them with television programs supportive of America's population control efforts.<sup>19</sup>

Ehrlich apologized for being unable to offer "sugarcoated solutions." Comparing population growth to the "uncontrolled multiplication of cells," he urged that America shift its "efforts from treatment of the symptoms to the cutting out of the cancer." Though the operation would "demand many brutal and heartless decisions," "radical surgery" was the environment's only "chance for survival."<sup>20</sup>

On the other side of this debate, Barry Commoner in his book *The Closing Circle* led his reader down a reductionist road no less narrow, though perhaps somewhat less convoluted, than the one Ehrlich had traveled in *The Population Bomb*. After lamenting that the American people had unfortunately "become accustomed to think of separate, singular events, each dependent upon a unique, singular cause," Commoner immediately proceeded to dichotomize the suspected causes of the environmental crisis. Was the root cause of the crisis population growth or the "greedy accumulation of wealth" or the "machines which we have built," he asked. Then, for the next three hundred pages, he developed a sustained argument that the nation's environmental problems were directly attributable to "the introduction of synthetic substitutes for natural products" since World War II. Having identified the cause of the crisis as technology run amok, Commoner was optimistic that an adequate solution would soon be formulated and the crisis "resolved."<sup>21</sup>

The Commoner-Ehrlich debate over the root cause occurred in the early 1970s, at what has often been called the beginning of the American environmental movement. In actuality, as a social movement in the United States, environmentalism began in the 1950s, escalated throughout the 1960s, and culminated in the period 1969-73, when environmental concerns were institutionalized in federal and state bureaucracies. From 1969, with the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act, to 1973, with the enactment of the Endangered Species Act, a legal apparatus for dealing with environmental issues was constructed.

This environmental legal structure has provided environmentalists with a seat at many of the nation's decision-making tables. From this seat, they have been able to influence policy and development decisions and at times reduce the rate of environmental destruction. This seat has not, however,

given them a forum for challenging basic values or the distribution of social power in American life. In other words, the table itself has not changed dramatically with the presence of an additional seat. Embedded in that table are basic assumptions concerning the origins and nature of the country's environmental problems. Among those assumptions are the following precepts: environmental protection can come only at great economic cost to the American people; a balance can be struck between costs and benefits; environmental problems can and should be solved as they arise on a case-by-case basis; the American way of life, based as it is on the capitalist profit motive, a culture of consumption, and economic growth and development, can be reformed so as to become environmentally sound.

No sooner had this moderate, reform brand of environmentalism become institutionalized than more radical environmentalists, who believed that the American way of life and/or basic American values and attitudes were major contributing factors to the environmental crisis, began to criticize the advocates of reform for dealing with surface symptoms rather than with root causes. Since the early 1970s a number of radical environmental perspectives have taken shape, and each has taken the moderate, reform agenda to task for failing to address the crisis at its roots. For example, in 1973 Arne Naess, a leading philosopher of the deep ecology movement, described the reformist position as "shallow," anthropocentric, and inadequate to the task of preserving the natural world.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, the advocates of the various radical perspectives have disagreed among themselves as well. They have most frequently criticized one another for misidentifying or overemphasizing a particular root cause at the expense of a more significant, and hence essential, cause of the crisis. Social ecologists have attacked deep ecologists for failing to analyze the social roots of the crisis. In turn, ecofeminists and environmental justice advocates have criticized both social and deep ecologists for not recognizing that environmental problems are essentially sexist and racist in origin. Debates over the root cause have become a deeply entrenched phenomenon in radical environmental discourse. Significantly, the dynamics of these conflicts have remained remarkably similar since the days of the Commoner-Ehrlich debate. One recent example will illustrate this point.

Like Barry Commoner, Murray Bookchin has a long history of involvement in the American environmental movement. During the 1950s he wrote repeatedly about the problem of chemicals in foods, and his 1962 book, *Our Synthetic Environment*, went far beyond Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in describing the scope of America's environmental problems and analyzing their social and economic origins. In that work, Bookchin called for revolutionary changes in American society as a necessary prerequisite for effectively dealing with environmental problems that were, he believed, rooted in America's social structure.<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, since the 1970s Bookchin has been a persistent critic of mainstream, reform environmentalism. Much of his criticism has centered

on its failure to address what he considers the root cause of the crisis. According to him, "liberal" environmentalism "is based more on tinkering with existing institutions, social relations, technologies, and values than on changing them." "Environmentalists," he has written, "are simply trying to make a rotten society work by dressing it in green leaves and colorful flowers, while ignoring the deep-seated roots of our ecological problems." Since its institutionalization, environmentalism has been reduced from a movement "that at least held the promise of challenging hierarchy and domination" into a type of engineering that reflects a "technical sensibility in which nature is viewed merely as a passive habitat . . . that must be made more 'serviceable' for human use, irrespective of what these uses may be." In a nutshell, according to Bookchin, environmentalism has been hijacked into "providing more palatable techniques for perpetuating . . . [the] irremediable diseases" of America's essentially "anti-ecological society."<sup>24</sup>

In addition to damning mainstream environmentalism for allowing itself to be co-opted by "the very system whose structure and methods it professes to oppose," Bookchin has become one of the most outspoken critics of his fellow radicals for their misinterpretations of the origin of the environmental crisis.<sup>25</sup> In 1987 he inaugurated a heated debate over root causes with members of the deep ecology movement that has yet to subside fully.

Bookchin began his assault on deep ecology at a national meeting of radical environmentalists held in Amherst, Massachusetts. "It is time to face the fact," he announced, "that there are differences within the so-called ecology movement of the present time that are as serious as those . . . of the early seventies." The greatest of these differences is between a "vague, formless, often self-contradictory ideology called 'deep ecology' and a socially oriented body of ideas best termed 'social ecology.'" According to Bookchin, deep ecology has "parachuted into our midst . . . from the Sunbelt's bizarre mix of Hollywood and Disneyland, spiced with homilies from Taoism, Buddhism, spiritualism, reborn Christianity, and, in some cases, eco-fascism." Rather than being a coherent new philosophy that can provide humanity with a much needed "ecological consciousness," as its adherents claim, it is an "ideological toxic dump" that attracts "barely disguised racists, survivalists, macho Daniel Boones, and outright social reactionaries."<sup>26</sup>

The central problem with deep ecology, from Bookchin's perspective, is that it has "no real sense that our ecological problems have their roots in society and in social problems." Deep ecologists as a group are uninterested in "the emergence of hierarchy out of society, of classes out of hierarchy, of the state out of classes—in short, the highly graded social as well as ideological developments which are at the roots of the ecological crisis." Instead, they offer only a slightly veiled Malthusianism that identifies "a vague species called 'humanity'" as the source of that crisis. In reducing "humanity to a parasitic swarm of mosquitoes in a mystified swamp called 'Nature,'" deep ecology is at its core deeply misanthropic. This misanthropy in turn fosters a "crude eco-brutalism" that celebrates famine and disease as nature's

way of defending itself against unchecked population growth. This tendency towards ecofascism, while most pronounced in the writings of Dave Foreman, an Earth First! founder, is also present in the central text of the movement, Bill Devall and William Sessions' *Deep Ecology*.<sup>27</sup>

Other leftist social theorists joined Bookchin in his criticisms of deep ecology. George Bradford, the editor of the "radical, antiauthoritarian" journal *Fifth Estate*, also finds deep ecology disturbingly silent about the social dynamics of environmental problems. In seeing "the pathological operationalism of industrial civilization as a species-generated problem rather than one generated by social phenomena that must be studied in their own right," deep ecologists have failed to develop a "'deep' critique of the state, empire, technology, or capital" and have reduced "the complex web of human relations to a simplistic, abstract, scientific caricature." Such "ecological reductionism," according to Bradford, "is far from subversive," because it neglects the "interrelatedness of the global corporate-capitalist system and empire on the one hand, and environmental catastrophe on the other." In relying on the maxim that the ecological crisis is the result of "too many people," deep ecologists are advancing the same Malthusian argument that corporate capitalists have been promoting for centuries.<sup>28</sup>

These provocative criticisms took deep ecologists by surprise. Bookchin, after all, has been identified and cited extensively in Devall and Sessions' work as one of the leading prophets of the biocentric vision that is central to the movement's philosophy. As the journalist Kirkpatrick Sale, a vocal defender of deep ecology, expresses it, before the attack he had assumed "that there was really only one great big ecology movement and that [he and Bookchin] shared an essentially similar position on the environmental destruction of the earth." Sale finds Bookchin's criticisms of deep ecology "not only sad but bewildering," and he defends the deep ecology tendency to consider humans collectively as a species. He believes that perspective has been useful in highlighting "the large consequences of a triumphant, exploitative species enjoying a population boom and technological prowess" and that "from this larger perspective, it does not really matter what the petty political and social arrangements are that led to our ecological crisis." He can only conclude that Bookchin, motivated by a cranky desire to impose "some imagined dominant theoretical purity" on the diverse ecology movement, sees deep ecology as a threat to his own brand of "ecological truth" that "ecological exploitation stems from social exploitation."<sup>29</sup>

The deep ecologist Warwick Fox has presented a more developed response to Bookchin and Bradford. Above all, Fox faults social ecologists for oversimplifying "the multitude of interacting factors at work in any given situation." In particular, he criticizes Bookchin's insistence "that there is a straightforward, necessary relationship between the internal organization of human societies and their treatment of the nonhuman world." The danger of such "facile" thinking is that it implies "the solution to our ecological problems is close at hand—all we have to do is remove 'the real root' of

the problem." In addition to being simplistic and facile, Fox finds the social ecology perspective "morally objectionable on two grounds, scapegoating and inauthenticity." It scapegoats complete classes of individuals; at the same time it excuses "oppressed" groups for their participation in ecological destruction.<sup>30</sup>

Like the Commoner-Ehrlich exchange, the debate between social and deep ecologists has been in essence a disagreement over the root cause of the environmental crisis. While on the surface the two camps seem to agree that the crisis is rooted in human attitudes that see nature as subordinate to man, just beneath this shallow consensus lurks an irreconcilable difference of opinion. From the social ecology standpoint, elites use their ability to control and exploit the natural world as a means of dominating other human beings. Therefore, in order to resolve the ecological crisis, systems of social relations based upon dominance and hierarchy must be destroyed and replaced with social systems rooted in egalitarian and democratic values. For deep ecologists, on the other hand, the real problem lies in a culturally determined anthropocentrism that prevents human beings from recognizing that other forms of life have intrinsic worth and a right to exist for their own sakes. They emphasize the need for individuals to "work" on themselves in order to cultivate an "ecological consciousness."<sup>31</sup>

Like Commoner and Ehrlich, social and deep ecologists have criticized one another for advancing analyses that oversimplify the complex origins of the ecological crisis. According to both parties, these simplistic interpretations sidestep the more difficult and socially disruptive issues that they themselves have identified as being most crucial. As in the earlier debate, in this one the opponents have failed to recognize that their criticisms are applicable to their own analyses as well. This lack of self-reflexivity is indeed amazing at times. For example, Fox chides Bookchin for proposing a simple solution to the ecological crisis, but he fails to comment on Devall and Sessions' claim that "a way out of our present predicament may be simpler than many people realize."<sup>32</sup> Bookchin, in turn, attacks deep ecology for positing a false dichotomy between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism while refusing to address Fox's claim that Bookchin himself has drawn just such a dichotomy between capitalist exploiters of the environment and the mass of people, whom he depicts as powerless victims of that exploitation.<sup>33</sup>

What is perhaps most startling about the charges and countercharges of oversimplification in these debates is the degree to which they are unfounded. Halting population growth, democratizing the technological decision-making process, restructuring society along nonhierarchical lines, and altering people's basic world views are not, by any means, simple solutions to the many deeply complex ecological problems that confront us. Each of these agendas taken alone would require nothing short of revolutionary changes in the ways Americans think, act, and relate to one another and the environment. Taken together, they represent the enormity of the challenges that we must meet as a species if we are to respond more effec-

tively to what many environmentalists agree is a "continuing ecological crisis."<sup>34</sup>

Because of the complexity and seeming intransigence of environmental problems, it is clearly time for radical environmentalists to focus less on defining their differences and more on determining the common ground that might provide the basis for a more coherent and unified ecology movement. As I hope this essay illustrates, if they hope to achieve a working consensus, radicals must strive to resist the well-established tendency in environmental discourse to identify the single most important and fundamental cause of the many environmental problems that have become increasingly apparent in recent decades.

The desire to essentialize environmental problems and trace them all to one root cause is obviously a powerful one. If a root cause can be identified, then priorities can be clearly established and a definite agenda determined. Although the intention behind this silver bullet approach to understanding the global environmental crisis has been to provide the environmental movement with a clear focus and agenda, its impact has been very nearly just the opposite. It has repeatedly proven to be more divisive than productive in galvanizing a united front against environmental destruction.

This is not surprising. It would indeed be convenient if all ecological problems sprang from the same source, but this is far from likely. If nothing else, during the last forty years it has become abundantly clear that environmental problems are deeply complex. Not only have they proven extremely difficult to unravel scientifically, but they have social and political aspects that further compound their complexity. Global warming, species extinction, pollution, human population growth, depletion of resources, and increased rates of life-threatening disease are just some of the many problems that confront us. The idea that there is a single root cause to any one of these problems, let alone to all of them taken together, is, to put it mildly, absurd. Because environmental problems are each the result of a multiplicity of causal factors, there can be no one comprehensive solution to all of them.

And yet radical environmental thinkers are correct in rejecting the piecemeal approach to environmental problems that has become institutionalized in American society. Thus far, reform environmentalism has proven itself inadequate to the task of halting the deterioration of the earth's ecological systems. But an alternative to that approach will not emerge until radicals reject the quixotic and divisive search for a root cause to the spectrum of environmental problems that have been subsumed under the umbrella of the ecological crisis. Instead of arguing with one another about who is most right, radicals must begin to consider the insights each perspective has generated and work toward a more comprehensive rather than a confrontational understanding of problems that have multiple, complex, and interconnected causes.

One of the purposes of this paper is to endorse and encourage a movement toward synthesis that has already begun to emerge in radical environ-



mental discourse. In late 1989 Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman, whose misanthropic views had come under heavy criticism from Bookchin, sat down and discussed their differences in a public debate. The upshot of this meeting was a truce, with both participants admitting that they had things to learn from the other. Foreman was most conciliatory and expressed regret for a number of the more volatile statements he had made during his career as an eco-activist. A year after his meeting with Bookchin, Foreman described a new agenda for the ecology movement. "On my best days," he wrote, "I seek a creative synthesis of all of these [radical] approaches into an integrated and coherent perspective which can guide our movement even as radical ecology activists continue to specialize in their particular areas of interest."<sup>35</sup>

A number of environmental thinkers have started the hard work of envisioning what such an "integrated and coherent perspective" might look like. The social ecologists Joel Kovel and George Bradford, although still critical of deep ecology, have sought to reconcile that philosophy's concern with humanity's "estrangement from nature" with their own focus on dominance and hierarchy in human societies.<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Merchant has suggested that the various radical perspectives, despite their differences in emphasis, are all concerned with understanding and ameliorating the basic conflicts and contradictions between production and reproduction in modern industrial societies.<sup>37</sup>

I would suggest that a possible approach to synthesis is to go to the heart of the disagreements that have divided environmentalists in recent years. Conflict, after all, is the crucible of synthesis, and the very disagreements that have split the radical ecology movement into factions have the potential of generating its greatest strength in the future. There is no question that radical environmentalists have dug deeper than reformers in their quest to understand the social and cultural complexities of environmental problems. The challenge for radical environmental thinkers is to continue this exploration, not with the intention of determining some essential root cause but with the goal of providing a fuller assessment of the related, complex, and multiple origins of the diverse environmental problems that we face. The challenge is to provide ecological activists like Dave Foreman with a much sought-after "integrated and coherent perspective."