Revelations from a Dying Planet: Agriculture, Corporate Capitalism, and the Murder of Nature

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Revelations from a Dying Planet: Agriculture, Corporate Capitalism, and the Murder of Nature

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

Planet Earth is in trouble. Present and future generations are contributing to and inheriting levels of environmental degradation unparalleled in human history. Increasingly violent weather, droughts, floods, water and air pollution, species extinction and other environmental calamities are becoming commonplace. Every day we read alarming statistics and bleak forecasts about the deteriorating state of the environment and our chances of future survival, and every day there's a new round of worry, finger-pointing, and denial. While government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), environmental activists, and concerned citizens labor to protect and save the earth community, their efforts continue to meet stiff resistance by those who benefit from exploiting and diminishing the earth's natural resources. While we all contribute to this problem as producers and consumers, one of the primary institutional drivers is corporate capitalism, particularly as it has evolved in the United States. Today, America's national and multinational corporations are dominant forces on the world stage, wielding tremendous power over economies, governments, and people's lives. Advocates boast that their success is the result of a superior economic system that promotes free markets, individual initiative, hard work, and private ownership, but in reality their commercial and financial success is largely the result of the brutal and murderous relationship human beings have with nature.

This faculty essay is available in Verbum: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol12/iss1/15
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Corporate Capitalism and Corporate Social Responsibility
The freedom to plunder and destroy the earth’s natural resources for human benefit and profit, with little thought given to the environmental and social costs, has been the unquestioned assumption of both capitalists and consumers since the dawn of the industrial age. While there have been many critics of capitalism and corporations over the years—Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith, Max Weber, and Karl Marx quickly come to mind—there was little sustained consideration of the environment in their work. Early pioneers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold were powerful voices for
environmental conservation and protection, but they had little impact on the business community. It wasn’t until 1962, with the publication of Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring* that the criticism became a catalyst for the environmental movement in America and corporations took notice. As noted philosopher Richard T. De George explains,

> Corporations, finding themselves under public attack and criticism, responded by developing the notion of social responsibility. They started social responsibility programs and spent a good deal of money advertising their programs and how they were promoting the social good. Exactly what “social responsibility” meant varied according to the industry and company. But whether it was reforestation or cutting down on pollution or increasing diversity in the workforce, social responsibility was the term used to capture those activities of a corporation that were beneficial to society and usually, by implication, that made up for some unethical or anti-social activity with which the company had been charged.

Over the years, the notion of social responsibility (SR) evolved and expanded its meaning to become what we understand today as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). While there is no set definition of the term, CSR is generally understood as a form of corporate self-regulation in which legal and ethical standards are voluntarily integrated into a company’s business model. CSR is a proactive approach to business that addresses environmental issues, worker rights, consumer protection, and other stakeholder concerns to minimize the possibility of litigation and government intervention. Today most Fortune 500 companies subscribe to CSR, regularly posting annual sustainability reports and environmental impact statements on their websites and issuing press releases to the media. Clearly corporations are listening to stakeholder demands for environmental sustainability and this trend is a positive one, but the problem is that many of these same companies spend millions of dollars in lobbying and campaign contributions to overturn or water down environmental regulations, challenge climate science, and defund regulatory watchdogs like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The level of ethical disconnection between the public face of CSR and the behind-the-scenes political maneuvering suggests that for many companies CSR is more of a calculated tactic than a paradigm shift.

Window dressing or not, the simple truth is corporate capitalism as it is currently conceived, marketed, politicized, and practiced is unsustainable. Many creative scholars and entrepreneurs agree with this assessment and are attempting to rethink and reform the capitalist model. Some promising proposals include John Mackey’s “conscious capitalism,” the “shared value” capitalism of Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, and the “natural capitalism” of Paul Hawken, and Amory and Hunter Lovins. All these approaches challenge how corporations structure and govern businesses and use natural and human resources, as well as how companies and consumers participate in markets. But I would argue that while these efforts are helpful and commendable—some reform is better than no reform—their efforts are only delaying the inevitable. As an economic system, capitalism is a human construction that is the dominant system on Earth—at least for the moment. Human beings created capitalism and human beings have and will continue to change it. But if the capitalist system is designed to consume and ultimately destroy the earth (albeit unintentionally), then changing some internal structures or replacing
it with a “new and improved” capitalist model won’t be of much help because we haven’t challenged the ideological assumptions that inform, shape, and drive the system.

**The Power of Ideologies**

Social and critical theorists have long understood the power of ideologies to consciously and unconsciously shape our views of reality. The beliefs, values, and goals of ideologies form the basic assumptions we have about the world and our place in it. Some are more pervasive and dominant than others. The “American Dream” ideology, for example, promotes values of freedom, democracy, hard work, optimism, and equal opportunity. These values ground the common belief among Americans that diligence and hard work lead to material success; laziness and moral weakness lead to failure and poverty. These ideological assumptions have influenced and shaped American culture and identity since the country’s founding and have inspired the hopes and dreams of millions who long to become Americans and share in the dream. Political parties, on the other hand, are ideologically driven and each one influences a segment of the American population, but not to the same degree.

Ideologies are embedded in all of our economic, political, and social institutions. They inform and shape much of what we think, say, and do and the results can be both constructive (e.g., civil rights legislation) and destructive (e.g., destroying rain forests). The existential and moral challenge for all of us is to become consciously aware of the ideological drivers that influence our thoughts and behaviors. Thus, in addressing our current environmental crisis, the question is not “How can we fix capitalism?” The question is “Why do we, as members of the earth community, consistently and purposely manipulate, exploit, and destroy our environment?” The profit motive is the quick and easy answer, but it doesn’t unmask the deep ideological roots of this murderous mindset. Many scholars have tackled the question and some progress has been made. The literature is extensive and multi-disciplinary and offers several persuasive possibilities, from patriarchy and anthropocentrism to social sin. But there are some philosophers and cultural historians in the deep ecology movement who are not wholly satisfied with those answers. They claim that patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and all the other “isms” are merely symptoms of a much deeper problem that lies at the very core of our humanity.

In 1969, the noted naturalist and philosopher, Paul Shepard, isolated the source of our self-destructive tendencies. In the essay, “Ecology and Man: A Viewpoint,” Shepard forcefully argues that we have become so alienated from nature and from ourselves as creatures of the wild that “A kind of madness arises from the prevailing nature-conquering, nature-hating, and self-and world denial.” We attempt to escape and overcome our creaturely self-loathing through market-driven diversions and the manipulation and control of nature. As colorfully described by Shepard, evidence of this condition is seen in “the behavior of control-obsessed engineers, corporation people selling consumption itself, academic super humanists and media professionals fixated on political and economic crisis, neurotics working out psychic problems in the realm of power over men or nature, artistic symbol-manipulators disgusted by anything organic. It includes many normal, earnest people who are unconsciously defending themselves or their families against a vaguely threatening universe.”
For Shepard overcoming this collective madness will require nothing less than a transformation of our consciousness and the process must begin with the rejection of the ideology and cultural practices of advanced agriculture, which he believes are the primary triggers for many of our environmental and existential problems. Advanced agriculture? Shepard’s claim is indeed a startling one, especially in America where the family farm has long been a respected and revered institution. Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (1930) is an iconic expression of this sentiment. But Shepard contends that the transition from migratory hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural communities is where all the trouble began. A brief excursion into this prehistoric world will reveal a very different way of life and relationship to nature.

**Hunter-Gatherer Societies**

During the geologic Pleistocene, or last Ice Age (2,600,000 to 11,500 years ago), *homo sapiens* first appeared, evolved, lived, and thrived in hunter-gatherer or forager societies, relying on hunting, fishing, and gathering a variety of wild plants, nuts, roots, and berries to feed themselves. The Paleolithic Era (or Old Stone Age) is the archaeological designation for roughly the same period of time. Paleolithic societies varied greatly in social complexity and cultural practices; nevertheless, archaeologists generally agree on some basic characteristics. Typically these societies were organized in small kinship groups or bands that numbered less than 50 persons. They sought shelter in caves, mastered fire, buried their dead, crafted ornamental objects, created art and music, and developed simple tools to aid them in hunting and gathering. A life on the move naturally kept the birth rate low and personal possessions were limited to what individuals could easily carry with them. They traveled across relatively large territories, following prey along migration routes, foraging for edible plants and other food stuffs, and moving on when the food supply was exhausted. Although hunter-gathers were omnivores and often participated in group hunts that killed significant numbers of prey animals, the environmental impact on local habitats was relatively low because they generally had time to recover once the band moved on.

The migratory life of hunter-gatherers required a high degree of social cooperation and some common practices that ensured their survival. The consensus among archaeologists is that foraging societies were egalitarian. Although there were levels of power and status among male members, leadership in the band was very informal and largely ad hoc. Conflicts within the band were discouraged and were usually settled through informal methods of social control, such as shunning, ridicule, and gossip. Men and women were perceived as equal partners, but all bands used a simple gender-based division of labor, with men hunting, fishing, and scavenging, and women caring for children, maintaining the household, and foraging, which often provided the bulk of the family’s caloric needs. While food sources were varied and plentiful, food sharing within the band was a common practice that ensured mutual survival and solidified social ties. Bands would also regularly gather at designated locations to celebrate seasonal festivals, find mates, settle disputes, and feast.
Nature was a sacred reality in Paleolithic societies. It was experienced and expressed in the people’s hunting and foraging activities, in family and kinship relations, in their arts and crafts, in rituals, burials, myths and magic, and in seasonal celebrations. For hunter-gatherers, home was a spirit-filled place, populated by a variety of spirits and gods that inhabited the plants, animals, rocks, trees, and other natural phenomena within their domain. In their world, human beings were not set apart as privileged, superior beings. On the contrary, the earth’s flora and fauna were their extended family, united in a harmonious cycle of life, death, and birth that was filled with meaning and value. In this symbol-rich world, the hunt was not merely the killing of prey for food, but a sacred ritual that enacted this primal cycle. As Shepard explains in *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*,

Among hunters the fallen prey is universally cherished and honored both for itself as a thing of beauty and in the solemnity and meaning of its death. Ceremonial salutation to the prey, and to those larger forces that it represents, are more than social conventions: they are the ritual occasions for personal witness. The rage of the hunter is necessary; he must not be overwhelmed by awe when he needs all his strength to drive the spear home. Afterward there is a quiet time, often a formal, reverent acknowledgment, a supplication, a thanking, or other ritual, in recognition of the relationship of hunter and hunted.²

Paleolithic artists captured the mythic nature of the hunt in their cave paintings, which depict a variety of game animals, including bears, deer, bison, stags and what appear to be mythical creatures that blur the lines between animals and humans. One prominent figure was the Master of Animals, a human-animal hybrid that may have been a hunting god or protector of nature.³ The animal master expressed the idea that “human and animal forms are easily and often interchanged, and the idea of a higher being who is thought to have an animal shape or to be capable of changing and combining shapes and who is regarded as a kind of lord of animals, hunters, and the hunting grounds, as well as of the spirits of game and of the bush.”³³ The quintessential symbol of this interrelationship, however, is the totem. Plant and animal totems symbolized both the lineage of a particular kinship group and their primeval kinship to the land and all its inhabitants. They served as tangible markers of a group’s mythic past and sense of place. In his superb study, *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschlaeger explains that “Totemic signs bind hunter-gatherers to the geographic locus of their clan. Home was wherever they happened to be within the domain where the band had always resided, hunting game and gathering foodstuffs... In such a world human beings could never be lost, for they were always among their kin, and the Paleolithic mind was therefore necessarily in its element wherever it happened to find itself.”³³³

By any standard, hunter-gatherer societies enjoyed a relatively healthy, peaceful, and sustainable existence and a meaningful relationship with their environment, which may explain why their way of life continued virtually uninterrupted for thousands of years. Nevertheless, our Paleolithic ancestors would eventually shift to agricultural food production in nearly all regions of the world. But why did they do it? Given their easy access to nature’s bounty, what would entice hunter-gatherers to switch to farming, which was risky, relentless, backbreaking work? Scholars have proposed a number of plausible explanations, including climate change, sporadic food shortages, the extinction of large prey animals,
and population growth. While all of these factors contributed to the transition, no single explanation seems to account for this global phenomenon. What is known is that a major warming cycle at the end of the Pleistocene and beginning of the Holocene (the present age) coincided with major cultural changes for hunter-gatherers residing in the Fertile Crescent region of the Middle East. It is here that advanced agriculture began.

**The Neolithic Revolution**

Scholars refer to this historic period as the “Neolithic Revolution” because of the significance of the cultural changes, but the term is a bit misleading. This was hardly a coup d’état, rather it was the steady introduction and adoption of agricultural practices among foragers over thousands of years that gathered momentum as it spread in fits and starts across Europe and the coastal regions of the Mediterranean. As with foraging societies, agricultural communities were quite diverse, but there are some common characteristics among them that provide points of comparison.

Roughly 10,000 years ago, hunter-gatherer bands began to settle down in small village communities, which necessitated the management of their food supply. Foragers had expert knowledge of their local habitats and they used that knowledge quite successfully when they began to domesticate the animals and plants they had previously been hunting and gathering. During the Neolithic Period or New Stone Age (8300 to 6000 BCE), early agriculturalists focused on a limited number of easily cultivated crops, such as wheat, barley, lentils, and chickpeas. They also selected and bred smaller herd animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs that were docile and more susceptible to domestication. But as Oelschlaeger explains, this move to a more sedentary lifestyle also had an accompanying shift in consciousness.

Although prehistoric people were relatively content in accepting the natural order and sought above all to maintain the integrity of their world, the agriculturists experienced an enormous quickening of the human potential to modify the naturally given. Rather than attempting to live in harmony with wild nature, as hunter-gatherers had done since time immemorial, farmers literally rose up and attempted to dominate the wilderness. Boundaries were drawn between the natural and the cultural, and conceptual restructuring was inevitable.

The conceptual restructuring of the agriculturalists marks the beginning of an anthropocentric ideology that would transform the world. The unquenchable desire to “modify the naturally given” was inevitable once hunter-gatherers became sedentary because their survival depended upon the successful working of a specific patch of ground. Migration was no longer a viable option. In the minds of these early agriculturalists, working the fields and fighting pests, storms, drought, and other natural threats transformed their view of nature from an all-encompassing sacred reality to an external force that had to be conquered and controlled or they would face starvation and death. Needless to say, fertility became a central value and goal as they irrigated their lands and systematically modified plants and animals for the most desired traits. The mandate to “humanize” nature through farming and
domestication thus marked the assent of the human and the desacralization of the natural world, essentially destroying its intrinsic value and primal subjectivity. In short, nature was objectified.

This shift in consciousness also changed the nature and practice of religion. The mystical union so vividly depicted in cave paintings and symbolized in animal masters and totemic figures was gradually replaced with a world of transcendent deities who embodied creative powers, natural forces, and who represented the animals and plants essential for human survival. The Sacred Bull, for example, symbolized virility, strength, and power and the Great Mother goddess personified nature’s fertility. In the later Neolithic period, other fertility deities, such as Ninlil, the goddess of grain and Dumuzi, the god of vegetation, were popular subjects of veneration. For agriculturalists, animal idolatry and fertility cults were another means to control their environment. Sacrifices of small animals and offerings of fruit, grains, and other food stuffs were made to appease the gods and secure fertility, stable food supplies, favorable weather, and other common concerns. These sacrifices (for they were indeed very dear) were regularly performed in public ceremonies usually overseen by religious and political “specialists” who often shared in the sacred meals. As Oelschlaeger explains,

All [these rituals and ceremonies] were part of a complex of behaviors and ideas intended to ensure fecundity and productivity. A religio-politico elite almost necessarily arose, serving the social functions of organization, control, and above all the rationalization of existence. The priest and chief supplanted the Paleolithic animal master, and society was slowly stratified. These new elites helped to explain the changing order of existence and thereby justify their own power.

Neolithic religion not only introduced social stratification to agricultural communities, but further solidified the people’s spiritual separation from the natural world. Their sense of superiority to nature was affirmed and sanctified by rituals and sacrificial practices that placated the gods for their benefit. The Paleolithic reverence for animals ritualized in the sacred hunt was replaced with the Neolithic slaughter of ritual sacrifice, reducing animals to little more than bribes for the gods. The ideological restructuring didn’t stop there, however. Nature became the means to achieve other ends that went beyond simple survival. For farmers who were diligent or lucky enough to succeed, agricultural surpluses were the means to acquire social advantages, property, and power within the community. As the centuries passed, agricultural communities became larger and more complex, eventually acquiring all the characteristics we typically associate with civilization, urbanization, and empire. Anthropologist, Leslie A. White, describes the evolutionary process:

[Agriculture] greatly increased the food supply, which in turn increased the population. As human labor became more productive in agriculture, an increasing portion of society became divorced from the task of food-getting, and was devoted to other occupations. Thus society becomes organized into occupational groups: masons, metal workers, jade carvers, weavers, scribes, priests. This has the effect of accelerating progress in the arts, crafts, and sciences (astronomy, mathematics, etc.), since they are now in the hands of specialists, rather than jacks-
of-all-trades. With an increase in manufacturing, added to division of society into occupational
groups, comes production for exchange and sale (instead of primarily for use as in tribal society),
mediums of exchange, money, merchants, banks, mortgages, debtors, slaves. An accumulation
of wealth and competition for favored regions provoke wars of conquest, and produce
professional military and ruling classes, slavery and serfdom.\textsuperscript{xviii}

In the Fertile Crescent this process of cultural evolution first appeared with the Akkadian emperor,
Sargon the Great.\textsuperscript{ix} Although dates vary, he reigned from approximately 2334 to 2279 BCE. An
ambitious leader and skilled warrior, Sargon expanded the Akkadian Empire to include all of
Mesopotamia, the Levant, and parts of Iran, but within 180 years of its founding, the empire abruptly
collapsed beginning around 2200 BCE. Scholars still debate the causes of the collapse but evidence
suggests a combination of prolonged drought, destructive land-use practices, power politics, invasion,
and war.\textsuperscript{x} Whatever the reasons, one thing is clear. The transition from hunter-gatherer societies to
agricultural societies generated an anthropocentric ideology that valued and promoted hierarchical
power, production, competition, accumulation, and aggression. All cultural endeavors were
ideologically driven to control, enhance, and exploit the natural world for human use and benefit—with
ruling elites taking a disproportionate share of the spoils. The consequences of this greedy and
murderous mentality are vividly expressed in the ancient lament, “The Cursing of Agade.”

\textbf{The Cursing of Agade}
The lamentation was written within a century of the empire’s fall. The catastrophe is attributed to the
reckless actions of Sargon’s third successor and grandson, Naram-Sin. Depressed at not receiving
favorable omens from the god, Enlil (the Lord of Wind and Storm), the king attacks and plunders Enlil’s
temple. In retaliation, Enil sends Gutian warriors from the Zagros Mountains to destroy the capital city
of Agade. This excerpt describes the destruction of the invading hordes:

Because of Enlil, they stretched their arms out across the plain  
Like a net for animals. Nothing escaped their clutches,  
No one left their grasp. Messengers no longer travelled the highways,  
The courier’s boat no longer passed along the rivers....  
Prisoners manned the watch. Brigands occupied the highways.  
The doors of the city gates of the Land lay dislodged in mud,  
And all the foreign lands uttered bitter cries from the walls of their cities....  
As if it had been before the time when cities were built and founded,  
The large arable tracts yielded no grain, the inundated tracts yielded no fish,  
The irrigated orchards yielded no syrup or wine, the thick clouds did not rain,  
The masgurum tree did not grow.... Those who lay down on the roof,  
Died on the roof; those who lay down in the house were not buried.  
People were flailing at themselves from hunger.\textsuperscript{xxi}
To calm Enlil, the other gods place a terrible curse on Agade so that it forever remains a place of ruin and desolation. As with many ancient texts, scholars long believed the events depicted in the curse were fictional; however, recent archaeological evidence and sediment core analysis from the Gulf of Oman suggest that the drought alluded to in the curse may have played a significant role in the empire’s collapse.

Reflecting on the lament, it seems that little has changed over the millennia. The Akkadian Empire was the prototype for successive cycles of development, urbanization, empire building, conflict, and collapse that has plagued human and environmental history. What has changed over the years is the medium through which the “religio-politico” elites channel their ideological vision. Today it is the leaders of corporate capitalism and their minions in international monetary and trade organizations that rule, using the tools of science, technology, and government to exploit and dominate the earth. With such power in their hands, legal restrictions and moral concerns are routinely brushed aside for the sake of market efficiency, profit, and growth. Today the new high priests of the economic order channel the religious impulse through a different symbol system, explaining the source and meaning of existence through commercialized myths and rituals so that consumers may venerate and serve the gods of the market, no matter the sacrifice. The cultural historian and ecotheologian, Thomas Berry, reiterates the subliminal message that grounds this order:

The power of the industrial system is in a pervasive feeling throughout the society that there is no truly human survival or fulfillment except in opposition to the genetic codings of the natural world. Nothing must be left in its natural state. Everything must be sacralized by human use, even though this is momentary and the consequence is an irreversible degradation of the planet.

The Neolithic message of human modification and control has echoed through the centuries, from Sargon the Great to today’s infamous “one percent.” When viewed historically, corporate capitalism is simply the culmination of a process of cultural evolution that began thousands of years ago, a process that is pushing us inexorably down the road to environmental disaster. The poisons and mass destruction generated by “throw-away” consumer societies, petroleum-based economies, industrial mining, factory farms, the military-industrial complex, and the transportation and energy industries are the products of an ancient mindset that cannot and will not endure. As the visionary CEO, Ray Anderson, so pointedly observed, “The first industrial revolution is flawed, it is not working, it is unsustainable. It is the mistake and we must move on to another and better industrial revolution, and get it right this time.”

Paul Shepard offers us an essential starting point for this global initiative.

The Next Revolution
As mentioned above, for Shepard, the next revolution involves more than simply unmasking and rejecting the agricultural ideology. The next step is to transform our collective consciousness by retrieving the wisdom of the past and embracing a way of life characterized by Pleistocene hunter-
gatherers, who were deeply connected to nature in all aspects of their lives. No doubt Shepard’s proposal will strike many as impractical and even downright bizarre, but his reasoning is based on evolutionary theory and the genomic markers in our DNA that ensured our survival as a species. Shepard contends that the genetic heritage that made hunter-gatherer societies so successful is not lost in the mists of time but is carried within us today and should be used as a guide for developing ourselves, our societies, and our relation to the environment. As he explains in *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*,

[Whereas] culture and ecosystems can be changed rapidly... there is not much we can do about altering our genes. The genes have been selected because they work. They prescribe for society though they do not specify—for example, the genes call for speech but society provides the language. The genome therefore “expects” a certain “fitness” in society and environment. By studying the answer of primal cultures to the demands of DNA, we get the best information about how to construct a human-friendly society and environment. We create ourselves and our world, but our genes dictate the range of feasibility. They specify constraints on our perception of nature and other humans and carry the wisdom of millions of years of selection.\(^{xxv}\)

For Shepard, the genome is “our Pleistocene treasure” that calls us to be and to live a very different kind of life than most people experience today. While he readily admits that we cannot turn the clock back and become whole societies of hunter-gatherers, he believes that in studying primal cultures “we may recover some social principles, metaphysical insights, and spiritual qualities from their way of life by reconstructing it in our own milieu.\(^{xxvi}\)

Our brief glimpse into foraging societies offers some sense of this ancient wisdom, which makes the search for the treasure in our DNA an important and essential starting point. There are many evolutionary biologists and social scientists who are currently conducting this important research, but transforming human consciousness requires another essential task; namely, a careful and critical study of human history—a discipline that has been increasingly marginalized over the years. We must study our history and cultural evolution so that we understand the ideological networks and seminal events that triggered this murderous relationship with the earth. We must understand how we came to be transformed from spiritually connected beings (*homo religiosus*) to self-interested, disconnected ones (*homo economicus*). If we don’t reclaim our rightful heritage and make a valid case for its value in the global community, the ruling elites of corporate capitalism will use their considerable powers to discredit and dismiss the effort, as they have done with every challenge to the status quo.

This is a daunting task, but we have no other choice. We can’t innovate, legislate, produce, or pray our way out of our current predicament, not when all of our cultural institutions serve the ruling capitalist system. We must develop educational programs that offer not only deep knowledge of our history, but a new vision and explanation of existence that is truer to our genetic selves and to the earth as our spiritual and cultural home.
Thomas Berry shared Shepard’s call to transform human consciousness, as well as the need to study primal cultures for gaining existential and ecological wisdom. But he also saw a special role for the university in this effort. As he keenly observed,

[T]he religions are too pious, the corporations too plundering, the government too subservient to provide any adequate remedy. The universities, however, should have the insight and the freedom to provide the guidance needed by the human community. The universities should also have the critical capacity, the influence over the other professions and the other activities of society. In a special manner, the universities have the contact with the younger generation needed to reorient the human community toward a greater awareness that the human exists, survives, and becomes whole only within the single great community of the planet Earth.

In The Dream of the Earth, Berry outlines an educational program for American universities that is indeed promising, and I urge readers to take a serious look at it. However, while I share his point about the role of the university in reorienting our collective consciousness, I believe American business schools must take the lead in this revolution.

For over a century, American business schools have been dedicated to graduating excellent practitioners of the very ideology and economic system that threaten our planetary survival. While many programs offer some courses in business ethics and executive leadership, the majority of course materials and textbooks support the values and reasoning that perpetuate the problem. Given the mixed success of CSR—and business ethics generally—I believe business schools have a duty to set the example for other disciplines by placing the welfare of the planet at the very core of their academic curriculum.

This kind of revolution is more Copernican than industrial, for it requires a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to an ecocentric approach to economics and business. In The Story of the Universe, Berry and his collaborator, evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme, provide the fundamental presupposition of this approach: “The human professions all need to recognize their prototype and their primary resource in the integral functioning of the earth community. The natural world itself is the primary economic reality, the primary educator, the primary governance, the primary technologist, the primary healer, the primary presence of the sacred, the primary moral value.

What would this Copernican Revolution mean for business school education? It would mean that students could escape the confines of the classroom and explore the wild and sacred nature of local habitats, establishing—perhaps for the first time—a sense of intimacy and kinship with the natural world. It would mean that students could undertake critical analyses of human history to understand how ideologies generate both creative and destructive economies and social systems, and to understand the difference between the two. With the welfare of the earth community as the first priority, students could explore an ecocentric ethics that includes the biosphere and geosphere in ethical reflection and decision making. Using their expertise and ingenuity, they could redefine corporate forms and models of governance, and develop sustainable markets, technologies, industries,
and enterprises that heal and nourish the earth. It would mean that students could aspire to something more than the empty goals of money, power, status, and possessions. They could discover the Pleistocene treasure within themselves and find comfort and peace within their natural home.

Many business school administrators and faculty will likely scoff at such a suggestion, but time is running out. The earth community can no longer afford “business as usual.” If American business schools were to integrate and promote these kinds of courses into their programs, corporations would soon take notice—just as they did with Rachel Carson’s book so many years ago. With vision, courage, leadership, and persistence, the business schools could launch an educational movement across America that would transform our collective consciousness, revolutionize capitalism, and literally save the planet. Paul Shepard sums up our collective challenge and moral imperative:

> It is time to confront the division between man and the rest of nature, between ourselves as animals and as humans, not by the destruction of nature or by a return to some dream of the past, but by creating a new civilization. As such, a cynegetic [hunter-gatherer] world is not a vision of a lost paradise; it is inevitable, a necessity if we are to survive at all.xxxi

Each day our dying planet reveals this truth and awaits the appropriate response.

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**End Notes**


vi Shepard, 138.

