

## FROM AN EXTRACTIVE TO AN ORGANIC ECONOMY

by Thomas Berry

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At the end of the 20th century, as we consider where we are in the course of our historical destiny, three moments in history stand out as having defined our current situation.

The first moment was the point at which the biblical-Christian emphasis on the spirituality of the human joined with the Greek humanistic tradition, creating an anthropocentric view of the universe. At this time, a certain discontinuity was established between the human and non-human components of planet Earth. Acceptance of the Earth as a single integral community, with every being having inherent value and corresponding rights according to its mode of being, was negated by attributing all inherent values and rights to the human. The essential value of the non-human was its use by the human. This led to a predator attitude of the human toward every other component of the planet.

The second moment occurred when this spiritual and humanist alienation deepened into a feeling that the natural world was an actual threat to human physical and spiritual well-being. This feeling arose when the Black Death killed at least a third of the human population of Europe from 1347 to 1349. Since germs were unknown, people concluded that the world had become wicked and was being punished by God. Along with a certain amount of moral dissolution caused by desperation, a new intensity of spiritual dedication developed, leading to a spiritual suspicion toward the world which still exists today. A split appeared between the secular and spiritual worlds; each disengaged from, and in a sense abandoned, the other.

The third, critical moment spanned the final two decades of the 19th century and determined, in some sense, the modern destiny of the United States, the human community, and the Earth. In the 1880s and 1890s, mechanical, electrical, and chemical technologies were sufficiently developed to move the entire US economic structure out of its rural-agricultural basis into an industrial setting. These were the years of transition from an organic economy to an extractive economy, which would lead to an assault on the integral functioning of the Earth's 4 1/2-billion-year-old geobiological system by humans determined to use the planet's resources in a manner immediately beneficial to humans, without regard for the consequences.

An organic economy is an ever-renewing economy. An extractive economy is a terminal economy. It is also biologically disruptive. As long as we lived within the seasonally-renewing bounty of the planet's biosystems, the cycle could, it appears, continue indefinitely. But as soon as we established a way of life dependent on extracting non-renewing substances from the Earth, we could survive only so long as these endured, or so long as the organic functioning of the planet was not overwhelmed by the violent intrusion involved in extracting and transforming these substances.

The transition to an extractive economy had been long in preparation. It required centuries of dedication to useful knowledge as the only worthwhile knowledge. By the late 19th century, the primary role of the Earth's non-human components was to be of use to the human, and the Earth was seen as a collection of natural resources rather than as a mystical entity to be revered, or as the larger community in which humans found the fullness of their life experience.

A kind of mysticism of progress developed that drove commercial and industrial entrepreneurs as well as scientists and engineers in their work. They were attracted not only by the quest for knowledge, but by the possibility of controlling the awesome powers of nature, releasing the human community from age-old afflictions, and living with an abundance of comforts as well as necessities. The final need was for a properly organized effort to assemble all the human abilities required to engineer this new mode of functioning of the planet. This power now came into being in the form of the modern corporation, financed by abundant capital, guided and controlled by boards of directors, and led by chief executive officers convinced that they could reorganize the planet in a much better way than nature was capable of doing.

Many of today's dominant corporations came into being at this time. No other event in human history bears a proportionate consequence. These corporations, along with others founded in Europe and Asia, took control not only of the human community but of vast areas of the natural world and, in a sense, intruded themselves into the planetary process. In the human community they established themselves first in the economic realm, then in the political and educational realms. The entrepreneurs directing the corporations became the controlling powers in all the basic establishments governing human affairs.

An indispensable factor in this sequence was the legal profession and the judiciary. As Morton Horowitz tells us in *The Transformation of American Law*, "By the middle of the nineteenth century the legal system had been reshaped to the advantage of men of commerce and industry at the expense of farmers, workers, consumers, and other less powerful groups within society." Thus the well-being of the commercial-industrial enterprise came to be identified with the well-being of the nation in all its aspects, including its people. Governments came to consider as their primary obligation the support of industrial, commercial and financial corporations in their predation on the natural world. With the news media supported by the corporations, with the distant unconcern of religion, with spiritualities of withdrawal from the distractions of the marketplace, it is little wonder that the natural world has been unrestrainedly assaulted throughout the 20th century.

There was only one further step to take in the mid-20th century: the move from many national economies to a comprehensive world economy, with neither control by, nor allegiance to, any government. The dream began to take shape at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, when a world economic organization was envisaged under leadership of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Transnational organizations could now function, unhindered, over the entire planet. The less industrialized nations could now be brought into the orbit of the industrialized nations, ostensibly for the benefit of everyone, but effectively for the benefit of the existing financial powers. Later the transnational organizations would press on to establish a borderless world through a General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, which would result in a World Trade Organization, whereby transnational corporations could exploit the Earth freely for economic gain, with responsibility to no people and no nation, and extensive power over the entire community of nations.

The corporation has become the basis of survival of the human community. When we survey the extent of corporations' control over our lives, our governments, the legal profession, the universities, the media; their legal rights to the use of property throughout the planet; their relative isolation from any political authority or cultural norms of action -- we begin to realize the dimensions of the challenge before us.

The truly tragic aspect of what is happening is that it does not violate anything in Western cultural commitments, but fulfills those commitments as they are understood in the closing decades of the 20th century. Any critique or quest for betterment must thus go much deeper into the perception of how the universe functions, how the Earth and its biosystems function, and what is the role of the human. None of the more extensive cultures of the Earth are capable of supporting an effective response to what is before us: we need a trans-human referent.

This referent in former times has been the universe itself, as the primary manifestation of the divine or the sacred. Obviously the universe is the primary given in any course of human understanding. We awaken to a universe. We have no immediate access to anything prior to or beyond the universe. Every other mode of being in the phenomenal order is universe-referent. While this might have been understood by former peoples, it is especially evident in our time, since all our scientific endeavor provides us with no explanation of the universe except itself. In this sense the universe is the primary value, source, and destiny of whatever exists. And it exists not as a vastly extended sameness, but in highly differentiated forms of expression so intimately related that nothing is itself without everything else. Any being can benefit only if the larger context of its existence benefits.

These aspects of the universe constitute what I would refer to as the Covenant of the Universe. The planet Earth fulfills this Covenant with special brilliance through the diversity of its ninety-some elements and their expression in the Earth's five spheres -- the landsphere, the watersphere, the airsphere, the lifesphere, and the mindsphere -- each of which is further differentiated into innumerable forms of expression. The wonder, of course, is the bonding into a single functional community of existence. Especially in the realm of living beings, there is absolute interdependence. No living being nourishes itself. The Earth's death-life sequence of dissolution and renewal has continued for billions of years.

The well-being of the soil and the plants must be the primary concern for humans. Every animal form, including the human community, depends ultimately on plants to transform the sun's energy and Earth's minerals into living substance for nourishment. To disrupt this process is to break the Covenant of the Earth and to imperil life itself. This is the indictment against the devastation inflicted on the Earth by the extractive economy; it also indicates the remedy that must be sought for survival of Earth's biosystems. Our primary concern must be to restore the organic economy -- to establish our basic energy source as the sun, and to foster the entire range of life systems of the planet, all of which are needed. We need to foster a new sense of the bioregional context of human communities. A new sense of literacy is needed: literacy as the capacity to read the Great Book of the Universe, particularly the Book of Nature as it is presented to us in the local setting of our lives.

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