

## A NOTE ON COMMUNICATION AND ECOLOGY

Lee THAYER

The interrelationships between communication and ecology hinge upon three conditions :

- *Whether* and *When* “ecology” becomes a subject of communication
- *Who* talks about it
- *How* they talk about it

This note is intended only to explicate those conditions, briefly, and to suggest some of the philosophical and practical implications.

### 1. Whether and When “Ecology” becomes a Subject of Communication

It was not so long ago that the term “ecology” was known to only a few highly specialized academicians and a few word-freaks. Today it is a household word in the industrialized nations.

Many animal and insect species are equipped with instincts which prompt them to leave areas which are ecologically unfit or inadequate, even if they have been the destroyers. The African elephant is an example. But man as we know him today does not have such instincts. If modern man propels himself into an ecologically precarious position, he cannot know so instinctively. He can know so only if he tells himself so.

It is in this sense that all of the threats to modern man’s existence, as well as all of his opportunities, must be created in communication. It is not that *physical* threats to our existence are increased or lessened by whether or not we identify them in words; it is that we can know that threats exist only by giving them life in words, in communication. The concept of “ecology” does not of itself alter the conditions of our physical surrounds. But if we did not give

cognizance to our physical surrounds by talking about them, they would be of no conscious consequence to us — whether we are done in by them or not.

It is in no wise given that whatever is noxious to man in his environment will be of concern to him, that is, given existence and form in his communication. “Man’s inhumanity to man“ has throughout history been the most deleterious of all environmental conditions — for individual men. The *Bible* commands Christians to “take dominion” over nature. What was of concern to those who shared this ideology was the domination, the subjugation, of nature, not the imperatives of “ecological balance”.

One concern of many people in the industrialized nations of the world today is with the condition of their physical environment. This need not have been. It is so only because “ecology” and related environmental issues have become subjects of communication.

The fact that some condition of man’s existence has become a subject of his communication does not guarantee that the necessary or even that appropriate remedial action will be taken. In communication, the Jews became a threat to Aryan purity. The fact that both talked of this condition saved neither from massive disruption, destruction, and tragedy. If such concerns emerge at all, they may come too early, or too late. Is our present concern with our “ecology” too late, or too soon? Those concerned with the environmental crisis say it may be too late; those concerned with the energy crisis say it is too soon. Does the saying-so make it so? We know about the power of an idea whose time has come. But when is that?

In *Libres-propos*, Alain said, “Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it is the only idea we have”. Given the other “crises” and insecurities of our age, which too are of concern to us only because they have become subjects of communication, our concern with our “ecology” is not the only idea we have. The danger is not that our concern with ecology is the only idea we have, but, like all of our other “crises”, it has been so fantastically amplified and so redundantly focused in upon that it may no longer be a matter of sympathetic concern, but pornographic concern. It comes at a time when the capacities of our means of communication attract and process more information than may be necessary — or desirable. It comes at a time when we have so greatly multiplied our technological capacities for communicating about matters which concern us that the greater threat to our humane existence may inhere not so much in our deteriorating physical environment as in the desiccation of our increasingly and incessantly bludgeoned sensibilities<sup>1</sup>. What touches

us deeply does not come through communication overkill. What touches us deeply is the subtle understatement, the elusive image — the promise, not the pain. What would be added to the simple statement, “I love you“, by a 500-watt amplifier or an 800,000 word report ?

We live in an age of communication overkill. *When* “ecology” becomes a subject of communication can make a difference.

## 2. Who Talks about it.

It makes a difference who talks about ecology. If two neighbors share a common erosion problem, and talk about it, they are likely to hit upon some expedient solution. When the problem belongs to “the city”, or to “the world” or to “people”, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine whom one should talk to.

If our ecological crisis had come earlier, we would have prayed for relief, or accepted our fate as sinners. Now we have a new religion : technology. The language of this new religion is rationality. If we want to know the state of our environment, we must ask a technologist. If he’s hospitable, he measures it for us, and his numbers and his formulae are supposed to tell us whether it is good or bad for us. If he is not hospitable, he simply tells us how long we have left. The high priests of technologism talk grimfacedly to each other about the state of our ecology. And our media provide the refrain, in great recurring spasms of solemn indignity. “They” are telling “us”. That makes a difference.

Politicians, too, speak of ecological matters. They are quick to recognize the kinds of issues that may get votes. “They” propose to save “us”. That makes a difference, too.

Yet who speaks more eloquently of our ecological problems than our self-appointed modern-day clairvoyants and fortune-tellers , the people who brought us Change and Future Shock and the End of the Golden Age and the many other popular ditties of recent years ? Consuming vast quantities of newsprint and electronic energy, they tell us we are depleting our resources. “They” are telling us what is wrong with “us”, and what “we” will have to do to set it right. A scientist who wouldn’t set forth the most trivial assertion in his own small field of specialisation without unassailable proof has no qualms about making the wildest assertions about our ecology with little or no proof at all.

The problem is, Who’s listening ? The heads of the great industrialized nations of the west have “science advisors”. Yet science predicts nothing it does not control. If our present ecological

crisis was a consequence of our attempt to bring nature under our control, how will tightening the control resolve that crisis? Who's listening, and to whom? How is more technology to solve the problem of too much technology?<sup>2</sup>

The trouble is that our public officials — to whom we have given over the problem of curing our ecology — must at least pretend to be members-in-good standing of the new religion. They must at least pretend to be listening to their scientific and technological advisors. There was a time when people and their kings alike listened to poets. Times have changed. Would a public official let himself be caught listening to a poet on the ecology? We citizens would recognize that right off as, at best, an indiscretion, at worst, an obvious insanity.

People who love the world speak of it from their hearts. No matter how crude the language, that is poetry. Those who must speak of the world in which they live from their heads and not their hearts do not love it. And what is not loved, dies<sup>3</sup>. It is not reconstruction programs our earth needs. It is love.

### 3. How We Talk About It

This is to say that *how* we talk about our physical surrounds makes a difference. We have brought our small planet to its present precarious state by objectifying it. Are we to save it by objectifying it further?

It makes a great deal of difference whether we refer to *the* ecological crisis, *our* ecological crisis, or *my* ecological crisis. *The* crisis? One can take it or leave it, depending upon whether one can make money of publicity or votes out of doing the one or the other. *Our* crisis? If you mean mine and my neighbor's, yes, I'm interested. But I don't live in Los Angeles or Tokyo or the Ruhr valley; let "them" solve their own problems. *My* crisis? How can that be? If I actually had such a crisis, I wouldn't need you to tell me so. I would be telling you about *my* problem.

It is not a task for mere language. The fellow who has a toothache doesn't need to be told he has one. Nor can he give it to someone else merely by talking about it. "Sharing" a toothache makes no more than flimsy grammatical sense.

It is not only that people are so adaptable that they can abide even the worst ecological conditions. It is also that the ideal has no place in our new religion. The language of rationality does not lend itself to speaking of the ideal, or of the possible. The language of rationality is the language of necessity. The language of rationality operates on "negative feedback" — that is, on what is necessary to

bring things back “on course”. Medical science, for example, has remarkable propensities for healing, for curing, for repairing, for alleviating, and, occasionally, for preventing. And these are necessary to our material well-being. But the relevance of these powers, albeit they have contributed much to our material well-being, inheres only in that to which they are addressed — in sickness and disease and accidents and physical discomfort. Alone, the rationality of medical science cannot give people either the desire or the will to robust good health. That requires a different way of talking.

Just so, when we speak of repairing and nursing back to health our ailing ecology, we speak the language of rationality, and we look to the symptoms. It is easier to talk about the symptoms, and it is easier to treat the symptoms.

*How* we talk about our ecology will determine whether we look to the necessary or to the possible. Until individual men learn how to care for the world in which they live when it is in good health, they will do little more than go through the motions of spreading salve on the symptoms when it is ailing. To alleviate the wounds and to repair the damage, we must rely upon the language of rationality. But for our earth to fulfill itself in robust good health, it needs the language of love — not in the abstract but in the everyday actions of individual men. How we speak of our world will ultimately determine how we treat it. The more we objectify it, the more rationally we speak of it, the more we will destroy it, regardless of our intentions. Love is not a remedial plan. It is putting concern for the other first. A plan to make the earth suitable for mankind is made of the language of rationality. If we loved our earth, we would be striving to make ourselves, individually, worthy of it. There is a profound difference between these two ways of talking about our ecology.

What we have done to our earth may have been done out of ignorance, indifference, hubris, or sheer pettiness of spirit. Not all of the rationality, not all of the logic, not all of science or the remedial technologies in the world can change that. Only people can change that. And how we talk to one another will determine whether we can, or will, do that.

*Department of Communication Studies Simon Fraser University  
Burnaby*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>An issue which I have dealt with more extensively in 'Man's Ecology, Ecology's Man', in *Main Currents in Modern Thought*, vol. 27 (no 3), Jan.-Febr., 1971, pp. 71-78.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Herbert J. Muller, *The Children of Frankenstein*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup>This position has never been more poignantly put than by Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Trans. A. Gregor Smith, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1937. A good example of love of earth is Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, London, Oxford University Press, 1949, which has the distinct advantage of predating our more recent publicity-seeking "concern" with the state of our environment — a subject which probably does more good for authors' bank accounts than it does for the condition of our earth.