

# The enemy is us

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**Global Accord: Environmental Challenges and International Responses.** Edited by Nazli Choucri. MIT Press: 1993. Pp. 562. \$50, £44.95.

**Ultimate Security: The Environmental Basis of Political Stability.** By Norman Myers. W. W. Norton: 1993. Pp. 308. \$25.

**Threats Without Enemies: Facing Environmental Insecurity.** Edited by Gwyn Prins. Earthscan: 1993. Pp. 197. £12.95.

**Global Political Ecology: The Crisis in Economy and Government.** By Adam Swift. Pluto: 1993. Pp. 345. £35 (hbk); £14.95 (pbk).

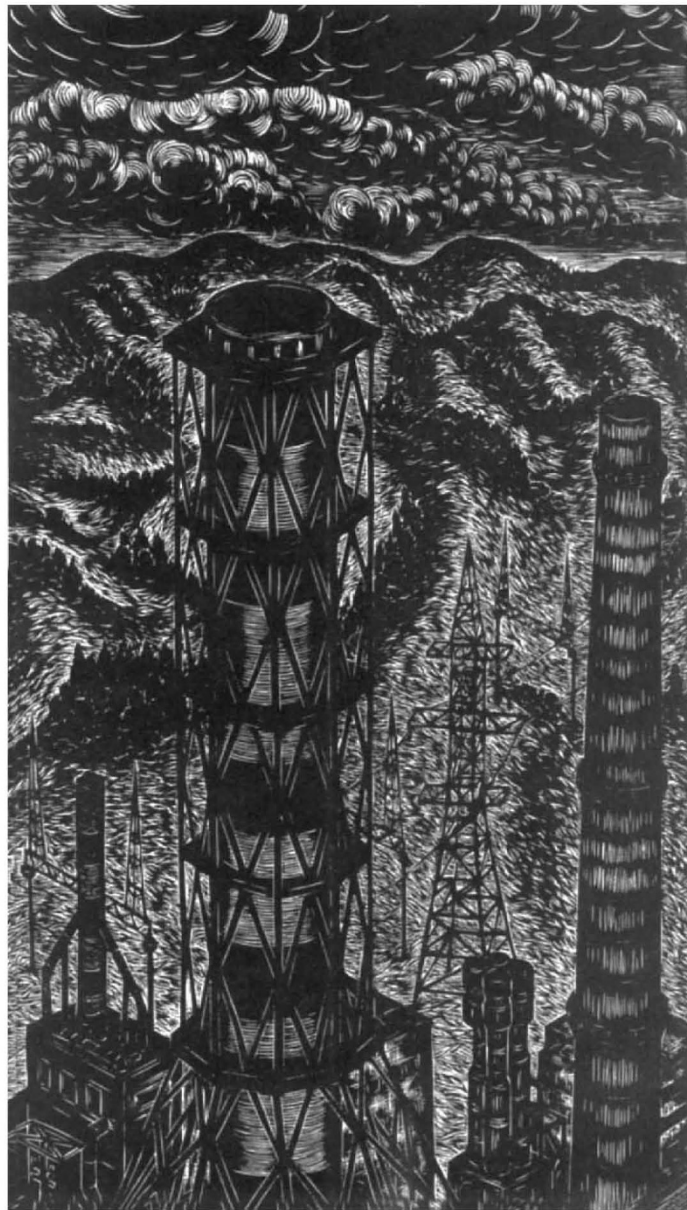
THE interdependence of living organisms and their habitat is the first principle of the science of ecology. It is also a sacred article of faith of modern environmentalism. One of the most frequently quoted pronouncements of John Muir, the gaunt naturalist and mystic who is a patron saint of the American preservationist movement, is that "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

The 'universe' Muir was talking about is the biological universe of living plants and animals and the resources that sustain them. Over the course of this century, the environmental movement has gradually emerged around the world as a response to the way in which human activity has degraded, and in some cases begun to destroy, the natural world that sustains life, including human life. That response has intensified with the realization that the degradation and destruction are starting to reach planetary proportions.

For decades, the environmental response focused on the linear effects of human activity on ecosystems, including such problems as population pressures, industrial pollution, the eradication of wildlife and its habitat, the erosion of land, the flood of hazardous substances into the environment, excessive use of fossil fuel energy, nuclear hazards and the general impact of applied science and technology on human health and the natural world.

In recent years, however, it has slowly dawned on environmentalists and policy-makers alike that the fate of

the community of life is hitched not only to overt human assaults on the environment but also to human systems and institutions — economic arrangements, political gov-



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**War for the world — response is now focused less on the linear effects of human activity and overt assaults on the environment, such as nuclear hazards (including Chernobyl illustrated above), and more on the effects of human systems and institutions.**

ernance, social and legal structures and, increasingly, relationships between and among nations. There has also been a growing awareness that the way in which these relationships are addressed by the international community will do much to determine whether there will be a workable system of collective security in the post-Cold War, post-industrial era. That realization was the underlying agenda of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. And it is the underlying theme of four new, very different books published in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The linkages between the created world of human institutions and systems and the fate of the global environment are addressed exhaustively in the most formidable and potentially the richest of the four

books, *Global Accord*, edited by Nazli Choucri, a political scientist at MIT. A chief goal of the book, Choucri says in an introductory chapter, is "relating environmental variables and process to social activities, national characteristics and international relations". This goal is pursued in 15 chapters by academics from a variety of disciplines, including political science, law, economics and ecology. The subjects include a review of the physical threats to the planet, the flaws in our technological, economic and political systems that are responsible for those threats, the intellectual transformation in thinking about the environment, and detailed examinations of how institutions and legal structures might be altered to respond to planet-wide crises.

All the essays are dense with information and several contain provocative arguments. One particularly compelling chapter on inter-generational equity, by Edith Brown Weiss, a law professor at Georgetown University, finds precedent in African, Asian and Islamic tradition as well as in Western law for requiring a commitment to preserving the Earth's health and resources for the benefit of future generations. A chapter by David G. Victor, Abram Chayes and Eugene B. Skolnikoff suggests parameters for building regimes to carry out international accords such as the Climate Change Treaty signed in Rio. These would include flexibility, transparency,

decentralization of monitoring and enforcement, fairness in sharing the burden, cooperation rather than intrusive implementation and a "significant role" for non-governmental organizations.

*Global Accord* is a scholarly book in the best and worst senses. At its best it is a comprehensive look at the incredibly complex set of issues that are encompassed by the concepts of global environment and sustainable development. These issues are examined in systematic, thoroughly documented fashion with occasional flashes of original insight. At their worst, some of the essays are virtually unreadable exercises in academic babble that bury the obvious under a stultifying layer of jargon. But for those willing to take the effort to dig hard, there are throughout this volume rich veins of data and bases for addressing what are arguably the most compelling problems facing the community of nations at the end of the twentieth century.

A very different sort of book is *Ultimate Security* by Norman Myers, an environmental scientist and combat veteran of the ecological wars. Myers, one of the early voices raised to warn, in books such as *The Primary Source* (Norton: 1992, 2nd edn), of the destruction of tropical forests and loss of biological diversity takes a personal, engaged view of the threats to global environment, their causes, their significance and their solutions.

The 'ultimate security' of the book's title is, of course, environmental security. "Security concerns", he writes, "can no longer be confined to traditional ideas of soldiers and tanks, bombs and missiles. Increasingly they include the environmental resources that underpin our material welfare. These resources include soil, water, forests, and climates, all prime components of a nation's environmental foundations." In fact, Myers finds that spending on armaments is actually undermining national and collective security by draining resources from programmes needed to preserve environmental stability. For example, he calculates that to provide safe drinking water to the one-third of the world population who do not have it now would take the equivalent of 12 days of current global spending on the military.

*Ultimate Security*, and indeed all four of these books, finds that demographic pressures as well as poverty within nations and economic inequity among them are major threats to global peace and stability. Myers devotes several chapters to describing how specific environmental problems, including disputes over scarce water in the Middle East, deforestation in the Philippines and land degradation in Mexico, are disturbing international and domestic tranquility.

Although he describes the quest for security as a task for all nations and all

individuals, Myers assigns special responsibility to the United States to show the way because, he says, it is now the only country with the technical and military power to do so and because it is also the world's biggest polluter. Although that is true, he is letting Western Europe, Japan and corrupt regimes in the developing countries off the hook.

But how can one not like a scientist who writes like this: "And the winds carry no passports. No more than rivers or birds, which likewise tell us that human-made divisions of our world are too artificial for the Earth under intolerable strain"?

The very notion of ultimate security, however, is dismissed by Sir Crispin Tickell, the veteran British diplomat who is now warden of Green College, Oxford. Writing in *Threats Without Enemies*, Tickell asserts that "There is, of course, no such thing as security, global or otherwise." Environmental insecurity is and will remain inevitable, he argues nevertheless that security is a goal that must be pursued. Just as peace-keeping is rarely undertaken unless there is war, there is not likely to be meaningful progress toward environmental security in the absence of environmental catastrophe, Tickell believes.

This kind of cold-eyed *realpolitik* can be found in most of the analysis in *Threats Without Enemies*, yet another set of essays, this one edited and coauthored by Gwyn Prins, director of the Global Security Programme at the University of Cambridge. In fact, one of the contributing authors, Hans Peter Durr, director of the Max Planck Institute in Munich, praises the "virtues of pessimism" in dealing with the complex issues of environmental security, a notion he finds "utopian". But dealing with the problems, he argues, will draw on utopian visions such as replacing our current "arrogant economy" with an economy founded on the principle of sustainable development.

But if *realpolitik*, defined as 'cynical disregard of moral considerations in political behaviour', is useful in analysis, it must be replaced by 'realism' in the political response to environmental insecurity, Prins contends.

One of the more interesting essays in this volume is by Admiral Sir Julian Oswald, First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, who believes there should and will be a growing role for the military in protecting the global environment. The armed forces, he says, are well equipped to do much of the research into environmental threats and solutions and to monitor environmental trends. More surprisingly, he believes that the military, especially naval forces, will have a coercive role to play in enforcing international environmental agreements such as fisheries protection treaties.

It must be said, however, that *Threats Without Enemies* is not an appropriate title for what this book actually demonstrates. In fact, it points to a very real and relentless foe best described by the immortal words of Walt Kelly's Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Finally, what to make of *Global Political Ecology*? Its author, described as a former civil servant and senior official, has written under the pseudonym Adam Swift. Because the book has much to say about free market economics, the 'Adam' is obviously borrowed from Adam Smith. And because he makes the modest proposal of scrapping our current economic and political systems, the 'Swift' is quite clearly Jonathan.

The author has constructed a kind of unified field theory to explain most of the world's woes, including environmental degradation, waste of resources, poverty in the developing world, recession, crime, drugs and, in the rich countries, terrorism, the abuse of human rights, the arms race and the threat of nuclear annihilation. All these problems and more, he argues with great intensity, spring from an economic system — and a political structure that supports it — designed more than 200 years ago for a world that has since changed beyond recognition. The "problem of problems", he contends, is that the international economic framework, based on greed and competition, "has reached what seems a definitive state of unworkability".

Swift marshals a staggering array of statistical data and other evidence to support his position. His text is accompanied by graphs, tables and flow charts so complex and bewildering that they seem to have been devised by systems engineers under the influence of a powerful hallucinogen. His proposals range from the utopian (a "broad balance of income security and distribution") to the Orwellian ("citizens should be conditioned to realise the duties as well as the rights involved in social existence"). His goal, which is nothing less than to "civilise market practice" and approach "true economic democracy", is wildly beyond the reach of our late twentieth century civilization.

And yet, there is no denying the grim logic of Swift's analysis of the bleak landscape to which our current road is leading us. At the least, *Global Political Ecology* should provide a needed radical leavening to the active but somewhat bland current geopolitical debate over sustainable development.

All the books discussed here, in fact, are welcome additions to what is becoming a kind of global town meeting over the future of the planet. □

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