

Book Review

THE POLITICS OF ECOLOGY. By James Ridgeway. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, N.Y., 1970. Pp. 222.

The months since Earth Day in April 1970, which is Ridgeway's point of departure, provide a backdrop against which many of his conclusions can be measured. My criticisms are leveled from a perspective developed through both personal experiences and noteworthy events on a national plane. Ridgeway's indictment of the ecology movement, as he labels it, is unjustified. It is the product of one who in analyzing any mass program must attribute capitalistic and profit-oriented motives to it.

Ridgeway's thesis is the pronouncement of the modern doomsday prophet—most if not all of our efforts to halt pollution are exercises in futility. His indictments cover the entire spectrum of those persons who pollute, who fight against pollution, and who should combat pollution. The Nixon Administration is lambasted as working to legitimize and spread pollution while pursuing “policies aimed at exploiting natural resources in other areas as well.”¹ Tucson is pictured as being threatened with a drought because of the lowering groundwater table due to the overuse of this resource by the open pit copper mines outside the city.² Neo-Malthusians, Paul Ehrlich, eugenicists, and other population ecologists are collectively condemned for aiming “at controlling the poor in the interests of the wealthy. The ads are aimed at white, upper-class people who, it is assumed, realize they must control the poor. But it is not the poor who exploited the resources of this continent and turned the waterways into open sewers.”³ Returning continually to the theme that all organized efforts to control environmental debilitation in some way embrace the capitalistic ideal, the author leaves the reader asking, “What are your solutions?”

Ridgeway calls for broad and sweeping change in laws and governmental policy, including elimination of the oil depletion allowance, denial of tax deductions to United States corporations conducting foreign operations, abolition of all oil import quotas, stopping of all drilling for oil and gas on the outer continental shelf, doing away with profit for all

1. J. RIDGEWAY, *THE POLITICS OF ECOLOGY* 176 (1970).

2. *Id.* at 177.

3. *Id.* at 194.

energy businesses, development of steam and gas-turbine engines to replace the present internal combustion engine, development of mass-transit systems in cities, and the general cleaning up of pollution with the aid of industrial profits.⁴

Two things are clear in regard to Ridgeway's conclusions: his suggestions are not novel nor does he provide any better way of implementing them than the public interest group system which he condemns as proliferating another "governmental system in which lawyers are a commanding elite."⁵ Further, it is increasingly apparent to the reader as he follows Ridgeway's own brand of prosecution that he is deeply resentful of any organizational structure and the eventual emergence of leaders, whether they be characterized as presidents, chairmen, or the elite. The corporate norm, he confesses, is to be feared most, for it exemplifies all that is distasteful in a capitalistic state. He concludes:

The proposals sketched out above are not meant as technical adjustments to existing governmental systems, 'reforms' for controlling pollution. What they represent are different ways of attacking concentrated corporate power, the source of pollution, thereby opening up the possibilities of revolutionary change.
...⁶

Having finished Ridgeway's book, one is not sure whether he meant to author a detailed and accurate criticism of the shortcomings of the environmental protection movement (which he does not), or a political and social commentary on the ills of capitalism and the need for a socialist use of the ecological critique, drawing hasty conclusions from sometimes vague generalizations (which he seems to do).

Has the 2-year experience since Earth Day confirmed his conclusions about our profit-oriented and capitalistic society? It obviously would require a volume of considerable length to refute the charge. In general, Nixon's policies are no better nor worse than those of the Johnson and Kennedy administrations. Of late, the Nixon people are getting rather hard-nosed in certain areas. For example, the order to close down air-polluting industrial plants in Birmingham was a tentative but important first-time action by the Environmental Protection Agency.⁷

I am inclined to view the decade of the 1960's as one in which we as a nation became gradually more aware of ecological problems, problems with which we will deal in the decade of the 1970's. Our national concern culminated in setting aside a day in April 1970 which we dedicated to the earth. Many, including myself, were highly skeptical of

4. *Id.* at 204-09.

5. *Id.* at 199.

6. *Id.* at 208.

7. 2 ENV. REP. 881 (Nov. 26, 1971): An "order halting emission of air pollutants from 23 industries was issued at 2 a.m. on November 18. Judge Pointer dismissed the injunction on motion by EPA as a thin rain fell (November 19) relieving the crisis."

this national event. Ridgeway discounts this ceremonial and with considerable sarcasm chides "liberal-minded people" who had found "a safe, rational and above all peaceful way of seeming to re-make society."⁸ A few paragraphs later Ridgeway summarizes his view of eco-politics:

Once the hysteria of the moment had passed, the politics of ecology seemed altogether dull, complicated and in the end paralyzing, bestowing on the participants a special sense of futility and alienation. It was an issue which told us only that we are all victims and that nothing changes.⁹

This is not a pretty picture, but it is one which Ridgeway paints throughout his polemic. If one is to believe him, we are all doomed by our own stupidity, greed and apathy.

Ridgeway is not alone. There is a whole body of more sophisticated literature of the same general bent. Leslie Roos, Jr. has brought together a sampling of this material in a volume of readings, *The Politics of Ecosuicide*.¹⁰ Professor Anthony D'Amato in the opening piece of the book maintains: "A brief inventory of current human trends should be enough to convince the most cynical eco-skeptic that the human species is gravely endangered . . ."¹¹ In light of the damage which is being caused by a disregard for our environment, it is difficult to disagree with men like Ridgeway and D'Amato. It is patently clear that the ecological movement is lacking in political clout. But does this mean that we are condemned to ecosuicide? I think not.

The lamentations of the extreme ecologists in large measure result from their failure to understand the policy process in America. Most forecasts give us nearly a century before we will destroy ourselves through inattention to problems like pollution and overpopulation.¹² Assuming that this is the shortest possible time in which we can do ourselves in, I am optimistic. We will gradually solve the most demanding of the ecological problems. At this point, there are perhaps some who would like me to tell them how. I cannot suggest remedies, because I do not have the expertise.

The work of the doomsday prophets should be placed in its proper perspective, however. Admittedly, Earth Day did generate much hysteria. Yet those who participated appear not to have ended up with a "special sense of futility and alienation." Fair-weather adherents have dropped by the wayside, but their places have been taken by other seemingly more dedicated and realistic people.

8. J. RIDGEWAY at 13.

9. *Id.* at 14-15.

10. *THE POLITICS OF ECOSUICIDE* (L. Roos, Jr. ed. 1971).

11. D'Amato, *The Politics of Ecosuicide*, in *id.* at 10.

12. See generally Crowe, *The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited*, in *id.* at 29; Grant, *Carrots, Sticks, and Consensus*, in *id.* at 99; Trop & Roos, Jr., *Public Opinion and the Environment*, in *id.* at 52.

There has been a fantastic proliferation of groups concerned with ecology. More importantly, the projects which the ecologists have undertaken are mind-boggling and in some cases over-ambitious. Age and economic status barriers seem not to count for much in some of the more important battles to make our planet a livable place. As an example, a combination of fairly well-to-do whites joined with a group of mostly poor Mexican-Americans to delay the construction of a freeway in Tucson.¹³

This is only one example out of many thousands which could be cited where the economically disadvantaged have evidenced concern about how they live. Such cooperation is certainly not the "control" of the poor by the upper class which Ridgeway denounces. While it is not easy to disagree with so distinguished an American as the late Whitney Young,¹⁴ I feel that the poor, perhaps at times for different reasons than the more affluent, are conscious of the debilitating effects of pollution and the agents which cause it. It takes a fairly mean view of human nature to assume that those in poverty possess neither an aesthetic sense nor a desire to create a better environment for themselves and their posterity. Given half a chance, the poor will respond and help solve ecological problems, as they have become involved with concentrated housing code enforcement and model cities programs. Thus, the ecological movement is present among the less affluent, but like most popular causes it finds most support among middle class groups.

Again, these are only examples from a multitude of efforts being undertaken by individuals of all ages and all economic circumstances to deal with problems stemming from our relation to the earth. Initially, the vast number of groups working for a better environment have created problems. There is a lack of coordinated effort, energy is dissipated, conflict between groups is commonplace, and discouragement does occur. What we are witnessing, however, are the first stages of the policy process in operation. The alarmist cries of Ridgeway and friends are a part of this remarkably complex and generally chaotic problem-solving operation as well.

13. Arizona Daily Star, Jan. 4, 1972, § B at 1, col. 4.

14. Mr. Young summed up the perspectives of the poor as regard ecological matters quite succinctly when he stated:

People live in blighted housing, can't find decent jobs, send their kids to second-rate schools, die too soon because they can't afford doctors, and the cities they live in are sinking under the weight of countless unresolved problems of poverty and discrimination.

That's where our national attention should be focused. The war on pollution is one that should be waged after the war on poverty is won. Common sense calls for reasonable national priorities and not for inventing new causes whose main appeal seems to be in their potential for copping out and ignoring the most dangerous and most pressing of our problems.

Quoted in Sprout, *The Environmental Crisis in the Context of American Politics*, in *THE POLITICS OF ECOSUICIDE* 46 (L. Roos Jr. ed. 1971) (original emphasis deleted).

Although I credit the extremists as playing a vital role in the political struggle for a better environment, it is not they who will solve the problem. They really are operating in the first stages of the policy process. According to Charles O. Jones, we make policy in rather blurred stages which include perception of problems, more precise identification of problems, policy formulations, legitimization and application.¹⁵ Jones' scheme is much more complicated than this rough sketch, but it is easy to see its merit both for analytical and explanatory purposes. Further, it is necessary to realize that the stages in the process are not cut-and-dried. For example, there are obviously very different perceptions of problems. It is only when these perceptions begin to meld that we can get some clearer notion of the problems and start formulating policies to solve them.

I would argue that presently we are in the early stages of the policy process as it relates to most ecological problems. In order to get policies legitimated and applied, there will have to be considerably more organizational effort. Again, we see the first stirrings in this field. All across the country environmental councils are being formed to make demands on decision makers. In Arizona, the Southern Arizona Environmental Council was recently established.¹⁶ Approximately 25 groups and countless individuals are affiliated with the Council, including interests as diverse as the American Association of University Women, Arizona Tuberculosis and Respiratory Disease Association, and Planned Parenthood.

It is obviously too early to predict what the Council and its counterparts can or will accomplish. But it is increasingly apparent that people with the necessary political skills, economic resources and power status are organizing to fight ecological battles in the public arena.

It is only through persistent and fairly massive efforts that much will be accomplished to prevent something akin to ecosuicide. Also, those interested in preserving and enhancing our total environment will need large doses of patience. This is so because, apart from the fact that the policy process is complicated,¹⁷ government does not respond quickly to most problems. Government works by fits and starts and seldom does anything very drastic or dramatic at any one time. In almost any area of public policy—education, poverty, discrimination or disease—one can readily see that things are accomplished bit by bit.¹⁸ Sometimes there are fairly long periods when nothing seems to get done.

Yet if one looks at the whole of American history, we have done a fairly decent job of solving problems. Always there have been those who

15. C. JONES, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF PUBLIC POLICY* (1970).

16. See *Arizona Daily Star*, Nov. 30, 1971, § A at 2, col. 4.

17. C. JONES, *supra* note 15.

18. See C. LINDBLOM, *THE POLICY-MAKING PROCESS* (1968).

argue that we cannot wait, that our system will be destroyed through inaction. But the system has demonstrated a remarkable resilience. Each of the grave and unique problems in our history—and each national problem is *grave* and *unique*—have been dealt with in time. Not everyone is satisfied with the particular solutions, but enough are accommodated that the system goes on and problems are at least partially solved. This, in my judgment, is what will happen in ecology. We are given to despair precisely because we do not understand that the problems associated with the environment are being put into the mill, policies are being formulated, and periodically one is legitimated and applied. All of this is part of the most remarkable political system in the world.

I am not suggesting that we have an automatic problem-solving political order. What I am proposing is that we must comprehend how intricate the system is and how the continuing efforts of those dedicated to saving us from ecosuicide can and will get the job done if they persist. This is at odds with Ridgeway and his counterparts, but in my judgment it is a more realistic approach to ecological problems.

*Conrad F. Joyner**

* Professor of Government, University of Arizona. B.A., 1953, Earlham College; M.A., 1954, Ph.D., 1957, University of Florida. Dr. Joyner has only recently retired from long service on the Tucson City Council.