

---

## The “Other” Environmentalism

It may be that we are situated at the beginning of a historical process of habituation. It may be that the next generation, or the one after that, will no longer be upset at pictures of birth defects, like those tumor-covered fish and birds that now circulate around the world, just as we are no longer upset today by violated values, the new poverty and a constant high level of mass unemployment. It would not be the first time that standards disappear as a result of their violation.

—Ulrich Beck

Less than five years after publicly insisting that ecological systems could never be reconciled with the rapacious nature of the capitalist system and that the only solution was a kind of economic socialism, Commoner ran for president of the United States. For a longtime radical, it appeared a strange move, but for Commoner it was part of a rational evolution. As he insisted in an interview shortly after the 1980 campaign: “What I have been doing in recent years is to look for the reasons for such problems as the energy crisis and the environmental crisis. I’ve ended up concluding that the reasons have to do with the governance of production decisions: who decides how we use our resources; what we produce and how we produce it.” He did not say it outright, but he certainly intimated that the manner in which risk was assessed and distributed was central to his critique. Risk assessment, or the priorities that went into assessing risk, were frequently the source of environmental and energy problems, and they were intimately connected to the means and modes of production. The crucial issue, Commoner had determined, was the democratic social governance of the means of production; those most subjected to environmental pollution risks should have a more prominent place at the table. “I’m involved in politics,” Commoner concluded, “because it’s become crystal clear that the issues I’ve been concerned with—nuclear issues, environmental issues,

energy issues—are not going to be solved simply by protest.”<sup>1</sup> Commoner had frequently referred to himself as a congenital optimist, but this was a rather striking reversal of his earlier faith in the scholar’s obligation to dissent. Or was it? For almost three decades, he had put his faith in an informed public; by 1980 he had concluded that the big change he considered necessary could occur only from inside and that public pressure from outside was not enough. At the same time, was there a better venue for raising public awareness than a presidential campaign? Commoner was sixty-three; reporting on his presidential candidacy, *Newsweek* described him as “a rumpled, somewhat owlsh figure, his eyes popping wide with enthusiasm behind his ever-slipping horn rims.”<sup>2</sup>

In April 1980—ten years after the first Earth Day—Commoner accepted the Citizens’ Party presidential nomination at a chaotic convention in Cleveland. He was one of the founders of the new party, brought to life the previous summer by a group of dissident left-leaning philanthropists and social activists, including the author Studs Terkel, the Gray Panthers leader Maggie Kuhn, and the Steelworkers insurgent Ed Sadlowski. The Indian-rights activist and founder and president of Americans for Indian Opportunity, LaDonna Harris from Oklahoma, was the vice presidential candidate. The idea behind the Citizens’ Party, Commoner told *Newsweek*, “was to provide an alternative for the growing number of dispirited Americans fed up with the major parties.”<sup>3</sup> Commoner compared the Citizens’ Party’s creation to the rationale behind the birth of the Republican Party in the nineteenth century, during which Americans “elected all the presidents whose names you don’t remember” in the years leading up to the Civil War. Commoner argued that these presidential candidates “were carefully chosen as nonentities because none of the political parties wanted to discuss slavery in a national campaign for fear of losing the election. . . . The creation of the Republican Party was really almost forced on the country by the abdication of politics by the Whigs and the Democrats.”<sup>4</sup> By the end of the 1970s, as Commoner laid out at the end of *The Politics of Energy*, the major parties seemed to be deliberately avoiding the socioeconomic issues that had given rise to the energy crisis and the environmental crisis.<sup>5</sup> The Citizens’ Party offered a voice to the poor, to labor, and to minorities who were alienated from mainstream American politics.

In December 1979, an organizing committee had filed papers with the Federal Election Commission to establish the Citizens’ Party. From the out-

set, the Citizens’ Party wrestled with the difficulties of adhering to a strict internal democracy. Its founders insisted that the new party needed to distinguish itself by establishing a strong sense of democracy within the membership, and that all local parties should have input in drafting the national party platform. This contributed to the convention’s bedlam. Position papers and resolutions were sent in from all over the country, and the convention sought the input of all the party’s members through a mail-in voting system, which Commoner later called “an insane idea, which utterly failed.”<sup>6</sup> Laudable as such high notions of internal democracy were in theory, in practice they turned out to constitute organizational nightmares. The party’s late start also contributed to its difficulty in raising funds; the Commoner-Harris ticket appeared on the ballot in thirty states and received 234,294 votes, well behind the Republican Ronald Reagan, the Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter, the upstart independent John Anderson, and the Libertarian candidate Edward Clark. The long-range hope was that the Citizens’ Party would receive 5 percent of the vote, which would entitle it to federal matching funds, but its grassroots principles and idealistic commitment to internal democracy failed to mesh with its top-down creation, which limited its appeal in the black and low-income communities from which it had hoped to gain strength. Before the November election, Commoner had expressed high hopes that the Citizens’ Party would become an established third party, but after its poor showing he drifted away from it and eventually became a key adviser to the Reverend Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition campaign in 1984, explaining that white leadership could not advance the kind of politics that was likely to change the American political landscape. Commoner helped Jackson mobilize the sizable underclass that felt increasingly alienated.<sup>7</sup>

Mobilizing those most oppressed by environmental pollution had always been a primary feature of Commoner’s new apparatus. Public information and risk analysis were specifically designed to give marginalized voices the technical tools with which to engage in public debate. Indeed, when Commoner claimed in *The Closing Circle* that “the costs of environmental degradation are chiefly borne not by the producer, but by society as a whole,” he presaged the sociologist Ulrich Beck’s concern that the production of wealth resulted not only in the unequal distribution of goods but also in the unequal distribution of environmental hazards.<sup>8</sup> The unequal distribution of environmental risks would become the concerted

focus of his activism during the 1980s and 1990s. The costs of environmental degradation were most disproportionately borne by the poor.<sup>9</sup> This was especially egregious, for as Commoner had pointed out in *The Closing Circle*, pollutants that inhibited human health also inhibited social progress.<sup>10</sup> Poverty also suggested that problems of environmental health and safety were imposed most significantly upon communities of color, exacerbating the uncomfortable existence of an institutional racism in the United States and prompting Commoner to charge that “there is a functional link between racism, poverty, and powerlessness, and the chemical industry’s assault on the environment.”<sup>11</sup> New petrochemical plants invariably sprang up in poorer neighborhoods such as those throughout “Cancer Alley,” an eighty-five-mile, pollution-ridden industrial corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.<sup>12</sup> According to Commoner, this was easily explained in economic terms. In making risk-benefit calculations, some economists proposed that the value of a human life be based on a person’s lifelong earning power. “It then turns out that a woman’s life is worth much less than a man’s, and that a black’s is worth much less than a white’s,” Commoner observed in 1987. “In effect, the environmental harm is regarded as smaller if the people it kills are poor—a standard that could be used to justify situating heavily polluting operations in poor neighborhoods.”<sup>13</sup>

However, the number-crunching and economic analysis of the previous chapter left out a vital component: the prescription of social costs resulting from environmental damage was flawed because the assessment of social costs assumed that all Americans shared those costs equally. But while some environmental hazards such as nuclear fallout did not discriminate against where they fell, others such as air pollution from power facilities, manufacturing plants, or waste incinerators posed problems that were more local in nature. The placement of such facilities—invariably in poorer communities—contributed to an unequal distribution of exposure to risk among Americans that adhered to class and color lines.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, society’s politically disempowered groups—those who invariably risked greater exposure to environmental pollutants and the resultant health hazards, and typically had the least access to health care—suffered the most severe environmental consequences, because they did not have the necessary franchise or organization to promote their social values and implement change. Through the 1980s, these disempowered groups found a

grassroots voice through the burgeoning movement for environmental justice, which found a national voice through the Rainbow Coalition.

This chapter sets out to chart this “other” environmentalism and Commoner’s participation. The sociocultural divide that broadly fractured American society by race and class also existed when it came to how Americans organized to protect the environment. To poorer communities and to communities of color, mainstream environmental organizations were not in tune with the socioeconomic conditions outside of the white middle class, and their national priorities and environmental activism indicated as much. It often seemed as though the protection of trees and birds was more important than the protection of human health and human lives. In New York City, for example, asthma morbidity and mortality rates were not only significantly higher than the national average, but studies indicated that those numbers were greater in the city’s poorer neighborhoods. Further, asthma was more concentrated in nonwhite communities, “with hospitalization and death rates among blacks and Latinos up to five times higher than those of whites.”<sup>15</sup> Such urban realities prompted many environmental justice activists to challenge the mainstream environmental organizations “to get off the stick of preserving birds and trees and seals and things like that and talk about what’s affecting real people.”<sup>16</sup>

The reality was never so black-and-white, but such tensions and perceptions opened a very palpable chasm between groups that generally shared related goals. The tension ultimately arose over the appropriation of the ecological language developed in the years leading up to the first Earth Day. It was this language that articulated the stakes of the environmental crisis. Naturally enough, that postwar language was shaped and dominated by the intellectual and scientific elites, who were prominent among the earliest and loudest broadcasters of the environmental crisis to a public audience. “Ecology,” “sustainability,” and “quality of life,” not to mention “beauty, health, and permanence,” entered the popular lexicon as the defining terms of this environmental language.<sup>17</sup> While the confluence of science and environmental ethics was one of the prevailing features of the new environmentalism, that approach typically concentrated its initial efforts on mapping the scientific implications of environmental decline: what pollution and despoliation meant to ecological sustainability and human health.<sup>18</sup> Critics of this mainstream approach would censure its apparent and “enduring ambivalence toward modernity, urbanism, and

cultural diversity.”<sup>19</sup> Since the first Earth Day, “social justice” and “power relations” have been added to the environmental vocabulary. The sophistication of an alternative race- and class-based ecological language or persuasion grew markedly during the Age of Ecology, and found its most provocative advocates in the burgeoning environmental justice movement, which elucidated the intimate connections between environmental problems and social injustice and the complexities of power politics in environmental decisions. If words such as “sustainability” originally referred to ecosystem health, the new language used them in connection with human and community *survival*, which constituted a substantial difference in how Americans imagined ecology and the environment. Environmental justice’s struggle against mainstream environmentalism was over the general acceptance of its contributions to that language. Risk and whose risk were central to that discussion.

Implicit in this discussion of risk was a growing awareness that the human body was, itself, a landscape threatened with pollution. Commenting on the growth of American environmentalism, Christopher Sellers claims that “the body—at once human and animal—has emerged as arguably the most critical middle ground where fin-de-siècle relations between nature and culture are being actively remade as well as rethought.” As Americans discovered how radioactive fallout, DDT, and other toxic pollutants were affecting not just the physical environment but also human health, rigid distinctions between nature and culture were blurred. This ecological awakening—the realization that harming nature also harmed human health—is the defining feature of what we might call “modern” environmentalism. “The human body,” Sellers insists, “still serves as synecdoche for ‘nature’ writ large,” and that nature included all Americans.<sup>20</sup>

This notion became a prominent feature of Americans’ responses to pollution and draws a very clear historical narrative from Commoner’s 1960s activism to contemporary environmental justice activism. More important, it provides for a critical expansion of the language of American environmentalism. Indeed, in seeking to push back the historical roots of the environmental justice movement, we might engage in a little intentional historicism. While the history of the environmental justice movement typically traces its origins to the 1980s, we might sensibly note that the language of environmental justice—introduced into the environmental lexicon in the 1980s and 1990s—is vividly present in 1960s civil rights and

social justice movements. Also, issues that preoccupied the civil rights movement—rats in tenements, urban poverty, asthma, pediatric cancer, struggles for access to and governance over urban space—are now recognized as environmental issues. The big point is this: minorities may have felt marginalized within mainstream environmentalism, but they were by no means absent from the history of environmental activism.

The substance of the political and historiographical tension between mainstream environmentalism and the environmental justice movement has much to do with perspective, and points to the significance of pluralism as a prominent feature of the American landscape. Pluralism, Louis Menand tells us, “is an attempt to make a good out of the circumstance that goods are often incommensurable.”<sup>21</sup> Because people understand the world differently and seek different ends, different people establish different—and often conflicting—priorities. While this truism obviously applies across the spectrum of human endeavors, it is no less applicable to divergent interpretations of the American environmental consciousness. Interest groups that are bigger, or richer, or enjoy better access to political channels have a disproportionate advantage when it comes to pursuing their agenda in the political arena. This power has the effect of muting related or minority perspectives and arriving at an artificial or contrived consensus. This is the substance of power relations, and a critical explanation for Commoner’s vehement opposition to Ehrlich’s population control advocacy. Pluralism suggests or embraces the notion that different groups are related but independent of each other. It advocates that there is no one vocabulary, but multiple vocabularies. How pluralism works in theory and in practice, of course, is a different matter. Typically, however, the social positionality of grassroots environmental justice advocates altered the context of the environmental struggle in which they engaged, thereby necessitating the adoption of a vocabulary distinct from the one already established by other groups. And that shift in focus was pluralism’s central—though often contentious—dialectical contribution to American environmentalism.<sup>22</sup> It is also within this interface that Commoner’s importance to the history of American environmentalism becomes most apparent.

“The emergence of the concept of ecology in American life is potentially of momentous relevance to the ultimate liberation of black people. Yet

blacks and their environmental interests have been so blatantly omitted that blacks and the ecology movement currently stand in contradiction to each other.”<sup>23</sup> So wrote the *Black Scholar* publisher and sociologist Nathan Hare in April 1970 as Earth Day activists filled urban centers across the country. While Hare embraced the significance of ecology, he lamented the movement’s omission of interests that pertained to people of color and their particular environmental problems. He cited Robert Rienow’s 1967 study, *Moment in the Sun: A Report on the Deteriorating Quality of the American Environment*, which he argued was representative of the environmental literature emerging in the 1960s; it made no reference to African-Americans. Further, while “suburbia” received considerable attention, “slums” and “ghettos” did not appear in Rienow’s index.<sup>24</sup> To Hare, the suggestion existed that some places warranted more environmental protection than others. Moreover, while population control policy suggestions appealed to a significant portion of the environmentally concerned, leading African-Americans opposed zero population growth, which they saw as a serious challenge to their political survival. Hare argued that the population explosion was less of a problem than the population implosion, the increasing concentration of people on relatively small proportions of the United States’ land surface.<sup>25</sup> This increased urbanization resulted in crowding and environmental problems, many of which were specific to communities of color, who were invariably poorer and less mobile. To Hare, the new environmentalists in suburbia were blind to the urban-living environmental issues most immediately relevant to communities of color.<sup>26</sup>

Many mainstream environmentalists agreed. As early as 1967, Sydney Howe, the president of the Conservation Foundation, complained that “we are now a racially segregated profession. . . . Conservation must be of and for increasingly urban environments and their people.”<sup>27</sup> But even the biggest ecological celebration in history failed to adequately build that bridge. Earth Day coordinator Denis Hayes had tried to demonstrate that civil rights, poverty, antiwar, and environmental interests all shared the same platform. Earth Day’s goal, he insisted, “is not to clean the air while leaving slums and ghettos, nor is it to provide a healthy world for racial oppression and war.”<sup>28</sup> But this message failed to galvanize broader acceptance of a more pluralist environmentalism, because it was drowned out by messages such as Earth Day creator Senator Gaylord Nelson’s assertion



that "the most critical issue facing mankind" was the environmental crisis, which made "Vietnam, nuclear war, hunger, decaying cities, and all other major problems one could name . . . relatively insignificant by comparison."<sup>29</sup> While the spirit of Nelson's statement might not have tangibly differed from Hayes's—the dangers of ecological degradation contributed to war, famine, oppression, and poverty—its suggestion could not have been worse in terms of marginalizing the groups that Hayes hoped to bring into the tent. Whereas Hayes recognized that the ambivalence peripheral groups might have felt toward the big celebration that threatened to turn attention away from their own activisms, Nelson's rhetoric catered to more ecocentric interests.

Communities of color might have sympathized with Hayes's initial contention as an attempt to embrace the holistic nature of environmental problems, but the popular strength of Nelson's more traditional statement carried the day. For the vast majority of African-Americans, access to political empowerment—achieved through acquiring economic empowerment—was the ultimate means of solving the environmental problems endemic to their poorer and more oppressed communities, and the message they received was that mainstream environmentalism was not yet ready to address those concerns.<sup>30</sup> Minority activists such as Freddie Mae Brown of Black Survival in St. Louis, Arturo Sandoval of La Raza in Albuquerque, and Charles Hayes, a prominent African-American union leader in Chicago, spoke to large Earth Day audiences, but they received far less media coverage and attention than did more mainstream activists.<sup>31</sup> As a result, black media sources confirmed the relative absence of widespread African-American support for Earth Day. The April issue of *Ebony*, the most widely circulated African-American periodical, focused on the continuing civil rights struggle, putting a photograph of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., on its cover, and making no mention of Earth Day in its pages. Neither of the national weekly editions of the *Pittsburgh Courier* or the *Baltimore African American* carried much coverage of the event, and Urban League President Whitney Young commented that "the war on pollution is one that should be waged after the war on poverty is won."<sup>32</sup> The message seemed clear: the struggle for civil rights—and not environmental integrity—was of primary importance to African-Americans.

Moreover, African-American leaders distrusted the growing environmental movement and interpreted the nation's widespread celebration of the first

Earth Day as a manifestation of the white desire to escape from the civil rights discourse. Mutual divisions between the civil rights movement and the environmental movement existed throughout the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> The civil rights movement initially regarded the environmental movement as a rival for federal funds and resources to which it felt it had a moral priority.<sup>34</sup> By the 1970s, African-American leaders complained that the environmental movement (as it was originally articulated) ignored the role of poverty in creating environmentally marginalized spaces for the vast majority of African-Americans. The environmental movement was, in their opinion, ecocentric, and threatened to move the national discussion away from the civil rights discourse, which advocated fuller access to the political economy.<sup>35</sup>

But rhetoric aside, in practice African-Americans and other minority groups were consciously and actively engaged in environmental activism, even if it did not go by that name. Claiming sovereignty over the places where their families worked, lived, and played was obviously a social struggle, but it was also inherently environmental. As Matthew Gandy argues, “The origins of urban environmental struggles [during the 1960s] reveal a radical fusion of grassroots demands for greater community control over urban space with a powerful emphasis on social justice.” Moreover, Gandy’s perceptive examination of the Young Lords of New York City presents compelling evidence that these second-generation Puerto Ricans were engaged in environmental justice activism throughout the 1960s.<sup>36</sup>

To Commoner, civil rights and environmental protection were inseparable. “To resolve the environmental crisis,” he predicted in *The Closing Circle*, “we shall need to forego [*sic*], at last, the luxury of tolerating poverty, racial discrimination, and war.”<sup>37</sup> He told the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, “A peace among men must precede the peace with nature.”<sup>38</sup> But Commoner also rejected the argument that environmental issues were so innocuous that they served to divert people from more serious, controversial issues, insisting that “as a political issue, environmental protection is neither innocuous nor unrelated to basic questions of social justice.”<sup>39</sup> He equated environmental hazards with obstacles relating to social progress: “One thing that does clearly emerge from nearly all statistical studies of the effects of air pollution on health,” he wrote in *The Closing Circle*, “is that they are most heavily borne by the poor, by children, by the aged and infirm.”<sup>40</sup> Commoner was not telling African-Americans anything they did not already

know. While he anticipated environmental justice’s tangible influence on mainstream American environmentalism by more than a decade, the issues that defined that movement were already prevalent in civil and minority rights discourse.

Much Earth Day environmental rhetoric implied that all Americans were equally guilty of overconsumption, but Hare and others argued that such contentions were oblivious to the fact that consumption and affluence were not evenly distributed throughout the country’s population. Commoner made the same comment in front of an Earth Day audience at Brown University. “Since the wastes generated by . . . intense consumption pollute our environment, the eco-activist is advised to ‘consume less,’” Commoner, said. “In the absence of the added statistic that in the United States the per capita consumption by blacks is much less than that of the white population, such observations are not likely to make much sense—to blacks, or to anyone who is concerned with social justice.”<sup>41</sup> Because he believed in the inherent relationship between poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, Commoner criticized the environmental movement’s lack of foresight in attempting to make alliances with minority groups; “ecological crusades” against overconsumption made environmentalism irrelevant to advocates of social justice, especially when the production of polluting industries took place within their communities. On Earth Day, Commoner described a recent incident to his audience at Brown University: San Jose State College students buried a brand-new car as a symbol of environmental rebellion. The burial reflected the mainstream environmental movement’s contention that excessive consumption was responsible for the environmental crisis, but it also suggested that the environmental movement had some ground to cover if it wanted to speak to and for the entire spectrum of the American population. Black students picketed the event, arguing that the \$2,500 paid for the car could have been put to far better use in the ghetto.<sup>42</sup>

For Commoner, the division between African-Americans and environmentalism, much like the division between labor and the environment, was grossly overstated, or was not as real as it seemed. Precisely because of their frontline experiences with urban health issues such as lead poisoning and air pollution, Commoner insisted that “blacks need the environmental movement, and the movement needs blacks.”<sup>43</sup> Commoner acknowledged the kind of marginalization expressed by critics such as Hare and actively

sought ways of including African-Americans within the mainstream context. “In many ways,” he argued on Earth Day, “blacks are the special victims of pollution.”<sup>44</sup> Commoner suggested that a white suburbanite could “escape from the city’s dirt, smog, carbon monoxide, lead, and noise when he goes home,” but that ghetto dwellers—predominantly minority populations—lived in it.<sup>45</sup> “To middle class Americans,” Commoner asserted, “survival is not a familiar issue. They have not yet learned how to face such a soul-shaking threat; witness our continued failure to appreciate that the existence of ready-armed nuclear weapons means that doomsday may be tomorrow. For blacks, the issue of survival is 200 years old.”<sup>46</sup> In the burgeoning environmental justice movement, Commoner saw the urgency that was absent in mainstream environmentalism.

After the 1980 presidential election, Commoner left Washington University and returned to New York City, taking his Center for the Biology of Natural Systems with him to Queens College, where he had first taught before World War II. Early in 1980, the college’s president and provost had traveled to St. Louis and offered to set up the Center at Queens under very favorable terms: a hard-money budget including three permanent tenured lines for personnel, adequate quarters, and the full support of the university administration. Approaching retirement age, Commoner accepted their offer, and early in 1981, three eighteen-wheel trucks moved the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems’ equipment east.<sup>47</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that Commoner was chased from Washington University, but it was clear that conflicts with the university administration motivated his departure. Commoner later recalled that the university had no intention of supporting his Center without him.<sup>48</sup> In its fifteen years in St. Louis, the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems, under Commoner’s leadership, had experienced remarkable success in raising grant money, which meant the Center (and Commoner) enjoyed considerable independence from the university. At the same time, however, Commoner had frequently clashed with the university over his very public—and often confrontational—stances against industry and, especially, the Vietnam War. In many respects, the move to Queens College was a homecoming, but Commoner did not go home to New York to retire. Indeed, he showed no signs of or interest in slowing down. Being based in New York City provided fuller opportunities to engage in environmental

and energy problems, especially those pertaining to urban environments and the urban poor. At Queens College, in Flushing, Commoner and the Center confronted a series of urban environmental issues, especially targeting urban waste disposal and related health issues. As Douglas H. Strong put it, Commoner “remained dedicated to solving the ‘real problems’ of urban and rural communities.”<sup>49</sup> That is to say, he continued to examine and address the social implications of the environmental crisis.

Commoner’s return to New York coincided with a new urban crisis: New York City’s waste management problems. In *The Closing Circle*, Commoner had attributed the environmental crisis to the wasteful and sometimes toxic nature of new technologies developed since World War II. The petrochemical industry in particular had capitalized on the production of new materials that rendered redundant or too expensive the older, organic, recyclable materials they replaced. But after disposable diapers and beer bottles and plastic wrap and milk containers were disposed of, they did not instantly vanish. They accumulated. Until 1970, burning trash had been a popular method of urban waste disposal—apartment buildings often had their own incinerators to burn residents’ trash—but the 1970 Clean Air Act Amendments raised emission standards higher than all but a few incinerators could meet. Americans turned to dumping their trash. When the odors became bad, they dug holes and covered the trash over in landfills.<sup>50</sup>

It seemed, however, as though waste disposal techniques were another example of what Commoner called the Band-Aid approach to environmental problems. Rather than solving the puzzle, industry sought a technological fix. Burying trash superficially solved the odor problem, but landfills posed serious environmental problems. In addition to exuding a stench, many landfills became repositories for unwanted pesticides and other chemicals, waste motor oil, and used cleaning fluids and solvents, which invariably leached out of the landfill and threatened underground water supplies and nearby surface waters. “Moreover,” Commoner pointed out in his 1990 book, *Making Peace with the Planet*, “the landfill’s organic waste putrefies and ferments, producing inflammable methane and other gases, some of them quite noxious, that pollute the surrounding air.”<sup>51</sup> Rather than simply contaminating the soil in which it was buried, trash threatened the air and water. It was like applying a Band-Aid to a gaping wound.

The quantity of solid waste also constituted a serious management problem in many urban centers, and intensified the existing health hazards, especially among poorer communities. Landfills were situated on cheap land close to urban centers, invariably next to poor and minority neighborhoods. But the problem continued to escalate. By 1991, a Department of Sanitation study estimated that New York City produced more than 24,000 tons per day of solid waste, not counting medical and construction waste or sewage sludge.<sup>52</sup> The problem with landfills was that, like fossil fuels, they were a nonrenewable resource; once they had been filled to capacity, their usability was exhausted. As more and more landfills were closed, more distant and more expensive new sites became necessary. Commoner explained in *Making Peace with the Planet*, “Like any other nonrenewable resource, landfills became progressively more expensive.”<sup>53</sup> As mountains of waste accumulated, the cost of depositing trash in landfills—the “tipping fee”—rose dramatically, making waste disposal uneconomic and inciting many urban centers to find alternative methods of managing their solid waste.

The solution was a return to an old idea: burning the garbage. In 1978, New York City Mayor Edward I. Koch proposed the construction of a new kind of incineration plant at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which would turn waste into steam or electricity. These “resource recovery plants” proposed to solve two problems at once: disposal of waste *and* production of electric power. But Commoner was unconvinced. The waste incineration industry consisted of the same corporate giants—Combustion Engineering, Westinghouse, Bechtel, and Babcock & Wilcox—that had pioneered the U.S. nuclear power industry before its collapse, and had now turned their attention to selling trash incinerators as a means of recouping a fraction of their losses. Commoner was also quick to point out that incinerators and nuclear power plants had one important feature in common: both produced pollution that did not exist before the plant was switched on. “Just as nuclear power failed because it created an environmental hazard—radiation—so incinerators turned out to be gravely hampered by the same sort of self-generated environmental hazard, in this case dioxin.”<sup>54</sup>

Incineration shrank the size of the mountains of garbage, but waste incineration policies failed to appreciate the validity of Commoner’s Second Law of Ecology, that everything must go somewhere. Commoner surmised: “Once regarded as a ‘proven technology’ that created no environ-

mental hazard, incinerators are now known to emit enough highly toxic compounds to create a risk of cancer and other diseases that is at best borderline, and more often unacceptable according to existing guidelines.”<sup>55</sup> Chief among these hazards were the dioxins that escaped from the emissions of chlorine-containing compounds such as plastics and other synthetic materials. Commoner called the new generation of incinerators “dioxin-producing factories.”<sup>56</sup> Dioxin is a name given to a number of toxic by-products of the burning of chlorinated wastes, and is generally regarded as the most potent cancer-inducing synthetic chemical.<sup>57</sup> As Commoner warned in a keynote address at the second Citizens’ Conference on Dioxin in St. Louis, on 30 July 1994, “Dioxin and dioxin-like substances represent the most perilous chemical threat to the health and biological integrity of human beings and the environment.”<sup>58</sup> Environmental Protection Agency documents acknowledged that in addition to causing cancer, dioxin disrupted hormone systems related to sexual development; attacked the nervous system; and damaged the developing immune system, leaving exposed children more susceptible to infectious diseases.<sup>59</sup>

On 18 May 1995, the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems released a comprehensive study on dioxin that demonstrated an eerie connection between dioxin and nuclear fallout. Dioxin, the study argued, created a toxic chemical fallout problem because the dust could travel more than 1,000 miles through the air before settling. Like strontium-90 falling to earth thousands of miles from test sites, dioxin, emitted from 1,329 North American sources, was an imminent threat beyond the immediate vicinity of its source. According to Commoner and Mark Cohen, the primary authors of the report, the greatest risk of human exposure to dioxin came—as with radioactive fallout—through the food chain, as dioxin contaminated dairy foods and beef even though they were produced great distances from the sources of dioxin emissions. Commoner’s interest in these findings was clear; by maximizing public concern, he hoped to garner enough public support to reduce or eliminate dioxin emissions in the United States.<sup>60</sup>

Dioxin had been detected as a highly toxic impurity in chlorinated herbicides such as 2,4,5-T, but was discovered as an environmental pollutant in 1973, when it was found in fish contaminated with the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. In 1976, a pesticide plant accident in Seveso, Italy, spread dioxin and other contaminants through the community, resulting in abnormally high rates of cardiovascular disease and

cancer.<sup>61</sup> At Love Canal, New York, in 1979, the discovery that the town had been built over a chemical waste dump—into which 130 pounds of dioxin had been dumped in the 1940s—forced residents to move out of their homes. Similarly, dirt roads and horse arenas in Times Beach, Missouri, were sprayed with 2,000 gallons of dioxin-contaminated oil for “dust control” on 26 May 1971. Fourteen years later, after the Environmental Protection Agency issued its first formal cancer risk assessment for dioxin, the town was evacuated and destroyed when it was found that the quantity of dioxin on the land still considerably exceeded the established cancer risk.<sup>62</sup> Commoner had long warned that the petrochemical industry produced toxins that broke out of the closing circle. Here, at Times Beach, that dire warning was made palpable. Much of the polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastics that are found in medical products, toys, food packaging, plumbing, and vinyl siding was thrown in the trash and incinerated. Commoner told his keynote audience at the second Citizens’ Conference on Dioxin, “Toxic waste is not simply a matter of poor housekeeping or bad management; it is an *inescapable* part of chlorine-based chemical production.”<sup>63</sup>

To Commoner, it appeared that the designers, operators, and regulators of trash incinerators represented the next generation of deceitful industrialists. As well as dioxin, the new incinerators emitted mercury vapors and other heavy metals into the environment. While the waste industry insisted upon the safety of their factories and denied that they created dioxin in the combustion process—they promoted their resource recovery plants as state-of-the-art technology—a 1984 Environment Canada study unequivocally demonstrated that dioxin was indeed released by trash-burning incinerators.<sup>64</sup> Commoner concluded, “Clearly, trash-burning incinerators have serious environmental problems. But they reveal a failing that is even worse: the incinerator industry has been building these devices without fully understanding how they operate, at least with respect to their impact on the environment.”<sup>65</sup> Lois Gibbs of the Citizens’ Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste remarked: “State of the art really just means industry’s latest experiment.”<sup>66</sup>

In response to these dangers, the debate over the Brooklyn Navy Yard incinerator took on the elements of an environmental justice struggle. While the emission of dioxin constituted an objective health hazard, the location of the site in the poor and minority-dominated neighborhood of Williams-



burg raised the ire of numerous local groups. Commoner and the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems provided considerable technical aid to the local residents. According to Gandy, "Commoner, in advance of the emerging consensus against chlorine, succeeded in politicizing the science of waste incineration to an unprecedented extent and enabled community activists to utilize the latest advances in international toxicology and public health research."<sup>67</sup> In addition to its studies on dioxins and furans, the Center also considered local and national environmental problems, including asthma, intensive recycling, and ethanol's replacement of gasoline in automobiles.<sup>68</sup>

To Commoner, environmental injustice remained inherently connected to the political economy. "To the economist, a person exists to work and to earn money. Therefore, they call the value of a life the expected lifetime earnings of that person." As a result, the argument continued, the health of the poor was a smaller expense than the health of the wealthy, and environmental responses could proceed based upon economic value: extensive (and expensive) cleanup in more affluent communities, and less spending in poorer neighborhoods. "Of course, the American people do not believe that it is fair, right, or moral that poor people should be exposed to more pollution than rich people," Commoner continued. "Yet, the strange thing is, that is exactly what we have been doing. New York City's proposed trash burning plant is not slated to be built on Park Avenue."<sup>69</sup> Naturally, the real estate in Williamsburg was cheaper than comparable real estate on Park Avenue, and this harkened back to Commoner's earlier point about public values. The fact that the land was more affordable did not mean that local residents were more open to being subjected to air pollution. But that fell outside the scope of the economic investment. Indeed, according to Gandy, "The processing and disposal of waste products presents us with one of the sharpest geographical indices of social power etched into the urban landscape."<sup>70</sup>

Politics and economics tied these issues together: the problem of waste disposal resulted in corporate interests pushing to relax environmental regulations on air pollution, environmental cleanup, and other impediments to their profitability.<sup>71</sup> As Commoner noted in *Making Peace with the Planet*, "A reduction in the [official] cancer risk would have powerful consequences not only reducing the cost of the cleanup in [Times Beach] and many of the Superfund sites, but also enhancing the environmental

acceptability of trash-burning incinerators, weakening the claims of Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange, and affecting the outcome of numerous court cases.”<sup>72</sup> But a reduction in official risk did nothing to reduce the real risk to which people were exposed. This kind of debate also threatened to limit the options available to resolve the problem. It was like looking at a gaping wound from a different angle so as to make it appear that the Band-Aid fit better. What this debate obscured was an examination of the alternatives.

And, as far as Commoner was concerned, there were alternatives. In his speech to the New Jersey Environmental Federation, he described two recycling studies conducted by the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems which, he indicated, offered some hope for a sustainable solution. In East Hampton, New York, residents conducted a ten-week pilot study, during which they separated their garbage into four groups: food garbage; paper; bottles and cans; and nonrecyclable plastics and other waste. The study demonstrated that with existing recycling technology, the East Hampton residents could recycle 84 percent of their trash.<sup>73</sup> Commoner also noted that in Seattle, Washington, residents had achieved 60 percent without even trying to compost their food wastes. “So it is clear that recycling can substitute for incineration to do the only thing that incineration is good at, which is to get rid of 70 percent of the trash. You can get rid of more of it by recycling.”<sup>74</sup> And recycling could also be cost-effective. While the East Hampton study suggested that recycling was 35 percent cheaper than incineration even if expensive hazardous waste was dumped cheaply and locally, the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems’ pilot recycling program in Buffalo, New York, showed that recycling was more economically beneficial to the local community. If communities purchased an incinerator, the study argued, money left the local community and ended up in the pockets of multinational corporations. Intensive recycling, in contrast, created more local jobs, and, in Buffalo’s case, the local economy would receive a \$12 million boost it would not enjoy with the purchase of an incinerator.<sup>75</sup>

But just as federal agencies funded research on solar energy just enough to suggest they were serious—but not nearly enough for it to yield any tangible results—state and municipal authorities set modest goals for recycling that would not damage the profitability of waste incinerators, those online and those contracted to be built. Commoner argued that the most

significant obstacles to successful recycling programs were state laws that set modest recycling goals. In New Jersey, for example, the state required all counties to establish programs that recycled 25 percent of their trash. “What’s the significance of this?” Commoner asked. “You have to ask, what happens to the other 75 percent?”<sup>76</sup> He continued, in *Making Peace with the Planet*, that 80 percent of trash could be recycled or incinerated, “but obviously not both.”<sup>77</sup> In sum, Commoner’s critique of state laws charged that states which aimed to recycle a quarter of their garbage were essentially guaranteeing that much of the remaining three quarters would be incinerated even though the majority of it could be recycled. “I tell you the New Jersey law . . . [is] a sly method for ensuring that incinerators will be built,” Commoner told his New Jersey audience.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, as he noted in *Making Peace with the Planet*, “the only insurmountable hindrance to recycling is building an incinerator.”<sup>79</sup> But while there existed an ecological allure to the inclusion of recycling in an integrated waste management program, Commoner argued that the compromise between recycling and incineration was not sufficient to prevent further environmental degradation. However, if the goal was “to give people a sense of ecological virtue, then any token amount of recycling . . . will do.”<sup>80</sup> Commoner also recognized that the reluctance to adopt a more vigorous approach to recycling had as much to do with the cost of the incinerators that environmentalists and officials were trying to phase out. That it would take twenty to thirty years to pay off the cost of the incinerators constituted another external diseconomy, this time the continued hazard to human health.

Commoner noted with some frustration in *Making Peace with the Planet* that the human capacity to understand the environmental crisis had not resulted in any kind of remedy. “For the first time in the 4-billion-year history of life on this planet,” he lamented, “living things are burdened with a host of alien man-made substances that are harmful to them.”<sup>81</sup> The vast majority of these pollutants had become even more prevalent in animal tissue than they were twenty years earlier, when Earth Day first imposed itself on the popular consciousness. The corporate aversion to alternative technologies—solar energy or recycling, for example, in which they had little or no stake—was the hub of the enduring nature of the environmental crisis. Risk and access were intimately linked. Without access to decision-making, the American public was more exposed to environmental hazards

imposed by business interests, and that exposure weighed disproportionately on the poor.

In a short piece that first appeared in *Greenpeace* in 1989, Commoner reflected on the environmental legislation that accompanied the American environmental awakening around Earth Day and asked the “important and perhaps embarrassing question: how far have we progressed toward the goal of restoring the quality of the environment?”<sup>82</sup> His answer the following year, in *Making Peace with the Planet*, was not positive: “The campaign to clean up the environment has largely failed,” he wrote, “but not for lack of effort.”<sup>83</sup> Commoner assessed the modest—and slowing—progress made since the energetic period immediately after Earth Day, but also pointed to a number of important and unequivocal successes. “Pollution levels of a few chemicals—DDT and PCBs in wildlife and people, mercury in the fish of the Great Lakes, strontium-90 in the food chain and phosphate pollution in some local rivers—have been reduced by 70 percent or more. Levels of airborne lead have declined more than 90 percent since 1975.” These exceptions to a less heartening trend, he argued, helped explain what did and did not work. “Every success on the very short list of significant environmental quality improvements reflects the same remedial action: *production of the pollutant has been stopped.*” DDT and PCBs had been banned; mercury had been eliminated from the manufacture of chlorine; lead had been removed from gasoline; and the cessation of atmospheric nuclear testing had resulted in a reduction of strontium-90 in the environment. “The lesson is plain: pollution prevention works; pollution control does not.”<sup>84</sup> In successful cases, instead of legislating limitations on the release of these toxins, governments restricted their production or use.

In contrast, controls on other pollutants had been much less effective and were, Commoner contended, “ultimately self-defeating.”<sup>85</sup> Gradual reduction of pollutants did not seem to work, and multiple entry points into the environment inevitably made control measures next to impossible. Between 1975 and 1981, the Environmental Protection Agency recorded that sulfur dioxide emissions, a major contributor to acid rain, had declined by 19 percent, but then remained constant. Between 1975 and 1985, nitrogen oxides emissions from automobile exhausts and power plants that were converted into photochemical smog increased by 4 percent, and in 1987, carbon monoxide, which caused respiratory problems, still exceeded Environmental Protection Agency standards in a number of cities

including New York.<sup>86</sup> “The few real improvements,” Commoner argued, “have been achieved not by adding control devices or concealing pollutants (as by pumping hazardous chemical wastes into deep water-bearing strata) but simply by eliminating the pollutants.”<sup>87</sup>

There were two related lessons here. The first suggested that compromise and control were not as effective as prevention. The only real successes had occurred when the relevant technologies were changed to eliminate the pollutant. As a result, the second lesson indicated that reforming production processes—democratizing the governance of the means of production—was the only effective method of resolving the environmental crisis. For Commoner, American environmentalism had been concentrating on treating the symptoms of pollution, not preventing the disease.

In his keynote address at the second Citizens’ Conference on Dioxin in St. Louis on 30 July 1994, Commoner told his audience:

The history of dioxin is a sordid story of devastating sickness inflicted, unawares, on chemical workers; of callous disregard for the impact of toxic wastes on the public; of denial after denial by the chemical industry; of the industry’s repeated efforts to hide the facts about dioxin and, when these become known, to distort them. . . . We need to learn what must be done, now, not merely to diminish, but to *end* the menace of dioxin and its many toxic cousins to life.<sup>88</sup>

To that end, Commoner embraced the environmental justice impulse. Environmental justice advocates, he argued in a 1987 article in *The New Yorker*, were better positioned to fight for environmental health, because for them, “The front line of the battle against chemical pollution is not in Washington, it is in their own communities. For them, the issues are clear-cut and are not readily compromised . . . the corporations are on one side and the people of the community on the other, challenging the corporations’ exclusive power to make decisions that threaten the community’s health.” Commoner was less charitable toward the major environmental organizations, which, for a variety of reasons during the 1980s, had shifted much of their resources into lobbying and litigating. For Commoner, this could result only in compromise. “The national organizations deal with the environmental disease by negotiating about the kind of Band-Aid to apply to it,” he wrote in *The New Yorker*. In contrast, “The community groups deal with the disease by trying to prevent it.”<sup>89</sup> Prevention was the key to environmental justice because those neighborhoods were the final refuges from many pollution hazards. As Commoner told his New Jersey

Environmental Federation audience, the grassroots environmental movement “exemplifies the cutting edge of environmentalism,” and was largely responsible for curbing the advances of the nuclear/incineration industry by asking for facts, seeking the truth, and insisting that their backyards were not sinks for pollutants.<sup>90</sup>

For Commoner, the grassroots struggle to participate equally in community and environmental decision-making processes was part of a much larger engagement to reclaim public sovereignty over quality-of-life issues and concerns. In sum, the environmental justice movement seemed to be fighting for social and democratic governance of production, which had been at the heart of Commoner’s own activism since before World War II. It was also in this particular struggle that Commoner saw the blending of social and environmental activism that he felt was pivotal to the survival and success of American environmentalism. American environmentalism needed to find itself more in concert with the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the feminist movement, the antiwar movement, and the labor movement. At the same time, these other interests needed to imagine the political landscape more holistically. Together, Commoner wrote in a 1987 article in *The New Yorker*, this larger movement for social governance “constitute[s] not only the major aspects of public policy but its most profound expression: human rights; the quality of life; health; jobs; peace; survival. . . . Here environmentalism reaches a common ground with all the other movements, for each of them also bears a fundamental relation to the choice of production technologies.”<sup>91</sup>

In 1990, Commoner began writing *Making Peace with the Planet* as an analysis of environmental improvements in the twenty years since the first Earth Day. “Since the early 1970s,” he wrote:

the country has been governed by basic laws that were intended to eliminate air and water pollution and to rid the environment of toxic chemicals and of agricultural and urban wastes. National and state environmental agencies have been established; about a trillion dollars of public and private money have been spent; local organizations have proliferated. Environmental issues have taken a permanent place in the country’s political life.<sup>92</sup>

But ozone depletion, global warming, the ongoing contamination of groundwater and oceans, increasing smog in urban centers, the continuing problems of storing more radioactive waste, and the widespread chemical contamination of food, water, and human bodies suggested that in spite of

all that legislation and effort to reverse environmental destruction, the American environmental consciousness was, in the journalist Mark Dowie's words, "losing ground."<sup>93</sup> Both Commoner and Dowie saw an emerging hope, however, in the environmental justice movement, which advocated prevention rather than control, and promoted, generally, a zero tolerance approach to toxins and other pollutants. Some chemicals could not be controlled. As the biologist Joe Thornton points out, "If Love Canal taught us a lesson, it should be this: pollutants do not stay where we put them."<sup>94</sup>

"Control" was part of the conservationist vocabulary. It made sense. One did not want to prevent resource extraction; one only wanted it to be properly managed so that resources were not wasted or depleted. "Prevention," on the other hand, was part of the new environmental language, which applied to questions of human health and community empowerment. The languages were fundamentally different and almost required a conflict of interests, especially when it came to the more dangerous chemical pollutants. But here was the significance of pluralism. The political scientist David Schlosberg has argued that "there is no such thing as environmentalism. Any attempt to define the term in a succinct manner necessarily excludes an array of other valid definitions. 'Environmentalism' is simply a convenience—a vague label for an amazingly diverse array of ideas that have grown around the contemplation of the relationship between human beings and their surroundings."<sup>95</sup>

The catch, or the problem, or the source of tension between the nationally based, mainstream environmental organizations and the environmental justice movement stemmed from their use of the same language and disagreement over its ownership. For local environmental justice advocates, compromise was rarely a part of their environmental vocabulary when it came to arresting hazardous pollutants that made their children ill and threatened their communities. There is no victory in limiting risk, they would argue, when risk should rightly be abolished or removed. Problems arose, then, when control of environmental pollutants was adopted even when local residents considered control an empty victory.

The ongoing political marginalization of poor and minority interests from decision-making processes was consistent with the stratification of American power. That environmental justice activism provoked the ire of corporate and governmental agencies was hardly surprising, given its

hard-line message and tactics. But this was a power game and, as Commoner noted, environmental justice “represents social (as contrasted with private) governance of the means of production—an idea that is so foreign to what passes for our national ideology that even to mention it violates a deep-seated taboo.”<sup>96</sup> The thrust of environmental justice’s campaign to protect human lives and communities from dangerous pollutants helped to expand the American environmental consciousness. Health and quality-of-life questions had been front and center at the first Earth Day, but the environmental justice movement ensured that these questions developed tangible rather than abstract meaning.



## Conclusion

---

### If We Would Know Life

Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

On 17 February 1965, at the fourth Mellon Lecture at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine, Commoner gave a paper titled "Is Biology a Molecular Science?" He criticized molecular biology and the new cult of DNA, which promised to unlock the secret of life, and concluded his remarks with the assertion "If we would know life, we must cherish it—in our laboratories and in the world."<sup>1</sup> It was a simple statement, but one that would resonate through most all of his activism and take on especially poignant significance by the end of the twentieth century. Commoner's environmental apparatus—dissent, information, and public risk analysis—had been designed precisely to avoid the hubris inherent in the notion that human science and technology were impervious to the laws of nature. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, that remained a lesson learned only in retrospect.

Early in 2002, Commoner would reiterate his conviction that life must be cherished in an article in *Harper's* that put him back in the center of a public and scientific maelstrom. As the Human Genome Project conceded that it would not uncover enough genes to account for the complexity of our inherited traits, as activists all over the world—and especially in Europe—had taken to the streets to oppose the continued development of biotechnology and genetically modified food products, Commoner closed another circle by returning to the discipline in which he had started his career, cautioning against renewed technological optimism, pointing to the limits of DNA analysis, and reviving his faith in the science information