

Introduction
to the author's book
Pay Now, Not Later,
a collection of essays on
environment and development
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Coming Home

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I GREW UP ON THE FARM AND LEFT IT, HAPPILY. NOW I HAVE a strong urge to return.

A barrio friend once told me that maybe I had travelled enough. He too had wanted to escape but could not. I could and did, and wished to come back.

If my friend is right, and I guess he is, not too many people end up liking the farm. I have traversed the world outside my little village – a rare treat, but at the cost of taxing the environment with the sheer amount of energy it takes. It matters little that my travels are subsidized by some benevolent entity across the oceans.

Smudging our mango trees to make them bloom was boyhood fun. It also introduced me to smoking. My playmates and I would make a heap of hay, moist leaves and firewood, and green grass and start a slow fire that produced billows of thick smoke. I still prefer carbon



dioxide to chemical spraying to induce flowering. (I would even defend the right to smoke on this shaky ground.)

The last months of the year were always the finest. October would turn the green to gold. The winds would sweep the aroma of ripening rice everywhere. November was time to tend the mangoes. It was also when politicians treated the villages to a feast of promises – say, a few kilometers of asphalt or concrete road. December was for homecoming, chasing rural lasses and impressing them with one's Manila sophistication. It was also, and still is, a much-awaited season of delights – sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves and purple rootcrop cakes which I now miss on my table.

I love pasturing our carabaos. It was one of the easiest chores on the farm. Atop my cherished companion, a species now endangered by the entry of Kubota handtractors in the 1960s, I would whistle my favorite tune, *Poet and Peasant* overture, which I learned from my father who played the saxophone with a local band.

My mother had a knack for making trees and ornamental plants flourish. I took after her. But I also liked the clearings in the neighborhood forests. For me the forests were dark and contained the monstrous *kapre*, other creepy creatures, snakes that bit and killed, and were the scenes of ghost and ghastly stories. (Did this primeval fear originally trigger deforestation?)

Biodiversity was an esoteric concept unknown in my youth. I discovered it much later and it brought me to Rio de Janeiro in 1992. As a boy with few boyhood skills, I envied the one next door who could shoot birds with his slingshot. I loved birds but didn't mind caging them or eating them or their eggs. I don't see many of them now and somehow feel responsible.

I never liked politicians, the dirty kind at least, and would be glad to see their species deliberately endangered. But I was happy whenever they came around with bulldozers that extended the paving – and civilization – into the woods.

Commercial logging, along with banca making, firewood gathering by lowlanders and slash-and-burn farming of the indigenous *aetas* widened the mountain forest clearings of Bataan. I never thought of the clearings as evil. I thought they helped drive away the ghosts and snakes. And like other children who hated school, I used to pray hard for typhoons



and celebrate floods, never making the connection to what was happening to the forests.

Modern farming came to our village in the mid-1960s. My mother's sister who was an agriculturist introduced us to fascinating hybrids – American watermelon, white leghorns, "super" pigs. Fertilizers, weed and pest killers brought wonders to our farmers, including my father. The farmers willingly gave up their carabaos in favor of handy Japanese-made farm machines. Carabao milk – a great favorite of mine – eventually disappeared. So did the mudfish, catfish, *tilapia* and *gurame* which used to teem in the ricefields. Still the farmers (and I) were happy and didn't notice how our culture was changing or how the quality of our lives was declining.

The city's allure was intense. How I wished high school were over. I always looked forward to fiestas, Lent and Christmas, when people came from the city to tell us about the good life there. I would understand later why people suffered the slums of Tondo – the city meant liberation from the farm.

I wax nostalgic about the 1960s at the slightest excuse. Activists of my generation talk about the decade as though nothing else can compare, which makes us no different from others who look back with longing at their own defining decade. The Vietnam War baptized me into the peace movement. Farther down the road was revolution. Environmental activism was but a side interest for much of that long journey.

In the Student Christian Movement (SCM) of the 1960s, situational morality was the 'in' thing. It sat well with my hazy mindset and psyched me up for the broader vistas. Theology of creation was still three decades into the future, a latter-day realization that God's presence in this world had nothing to do with the loss of biodiversity and pollution of the atmosphere. But I was not more a believer in anything than my agnostic idol Bertrand Russell even as SCM treated me to endless bible sessions.

In Jean Paul Sartre and Russell I found a rational anchor. I joined the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in 1967. I never mixed with the flower people, although I thought "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and psychedelia were fun – from a distance. (Actually, I would have given up anything to have gone to Woodstock or to have climbed up to some Himalayan shangrila).



It turned out that I was not – except in my imagination – cut out for the politics of avoidance, for creating insulated societies. I was headed for a different sort of engagement. Stormy Paris of 1968 became a new Mecca. The more I pushed deep into pacifism the more I saw the need for revolution.

Why I graduated from peace activism to revolution is something I never asked myself. Probably the transition happened so smoothly that I didn't notice it. But I must particularly thank Sartre for reconciling the free individual with Marx's collective. I needed a theory of class to navigate the crazy world of dictators and big money.

The ecocide in the Vietnam War saga was a mere side story for me. The historically unparalleled bombing, defoliation by napalm and poisoning by chemical and biological weapons are well documented. It was the inhumanity of it all that caught my generation's attention. What happened to the forests, the soil, the water were merely incidental concerns. Now I have the benefit of hindsight to see the ecological dimension of that story.

Now I can also share the feminist perspective which might judge the Vietnam War as the height of patriarchal folly. In those days, though, I was much too entranced by Hemingway's world of men to be in the good graces of feminist *compañeras*. I never quite understood - - or maybe I just didn't want to understand – what they were saying. It was not easy for me to see the connection between the crazy arms race and male aggression. The bosses of the military-industrial complex were not as visible as the bullring *machos* of Hemingway. Gun as extension of the male ego and man raping Mother Nature were images I would use only half seriously, to spice up what others dismissed as sexist jokes. But I never thought of women as inferior to men. My mother and her nearly all-women brood had taught me well. I know oppression when I see it – wife beating, rape, etcetera. But I call them crimes against humanity, regardless of gender.

As a peace activist, and later as a revolutionary, I viewed the irrationality of the arms race almost solely from the angle of social justice. In the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, we would point out, for example, how much was being wasted on aircraft carriers, nuclear subs and ICBMs when the money could instead be used to irrigate the Sahara, to wipe out hunger, disease and illiteracy.



In 1970, as a radical, I had my first crack at environmentalism in my hometown. Our rivers, irrigation water and air were being polluted by a pulp and paper mill, the same one we welcomed in the 1960s as a godsend to our poor, quiet and inconsequential town, and one we thought would lift us to modernity. My friends and I got the whole town to persuade the firm to install mitigating measures. Little did I realize that this type of cross-class citizens' movement would be cutting edge in the future, the type that would bring dictators to their knees in the 1980s.

I was in prison when a similar movement was repeated. This time it was much larger and organized around another issue: the first Philippine nuclear power plant, which was built in my province. The anti-nuke citizens' movement in Bataan, supported by larger movements in Manila and elsewhere foretold the EDSA revolution of 1986 – thousands of citizens from every strata of society responded to a human-welfare issue and lay their bodies across the path of mighty armored machines and in the firing line. Although it was less for environmentalism and more for resistance to tyranny, this citizens' movement helped shape future citizen action around environment and development issues. Although locked up in my prison cell, I was proud to be a part of that movement.

In my occasional-guerilla days, I did not see the forest through an environmental looking glass. The forest was a friend mainly for the natural cover and food that it offered and for the satisfaction it brought the collectors of wild orchids among us. I was not aware at the beginning that my New People's Army comrades were taxing the timber companies in the Sierra Madre and elsewhere. And even if I had known, I wonder if I would have protested on behalf of the environment, a dimension external to our revolutionary paradigm back then. We talked only of equity and power; the notion of carrying capacity was then still a total stranger.

Fresh out of prison after the EDSA revolution in 1986, I entered the fashionable world of the non-governmental organization. I soon learned that this species was the new darling of the development set and it felt good to belong. On top of doing serious local work, I was as one with the chosen few who could talk about poverty and injustice, dabble in hodgepodge development theory *and* roam the globe.

Choosing to work with the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM) was never agonizing for me despite accusations that it had once rubbed elbows with the enemy. By then I already believed in



multilevel and multidimensional struggle, never mind what theory it stood on. Friends in the movement were wont to say I had completely given up on the class line. I thought it was partly true but couldn't care less. I had started to tinker with heresies so long ago as to remain unaffected by the friendly fire that still gives others sleepless nights.

I thought PRRM had a strategy that could contribute to reorganizing our society. We helped local communities do scale demonstrations of their development alternatives. We also strived, together with other groups, to make government and business create an environment that allowed greater community empowerment, development and environmental restoration.

Our strategy, I would find out only later, was akin to ecoanarchism. I didn't mind and actually relished the idea. For one thing, it called to mind my old fascination with the likes of Bakunin when I was being initiated into Marxism in the late 1960s. Ecoanarchism (my heart beats for it) may also yet be the wave of the future in this era of globalization from the top where resources and decisions are monopolized by a few hands. Rationally though, I'm more inclined toward a socialist green path to the future.

An American friend in 1988 gave me what he proudly called the bible of the future, *Our Common Future*, formally introducing me to the now-trendy idea of sustainable development and to the UN process which led to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the "Earth Summit" of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro.

My new-found theme was handy and user-friendly. As far as I know very few potentially revolutionary themes are as inclusive. Sustainable development has found adherents across the whole political spectrum, from the reluctant communist to the profiteering user. Friends howled, "Nothing new!" and they may be partly right. I disagree with them not because I'm any less cynical about fads but because of a lingering disappointment with orthodoxies which I now consider inadequate. I'm inclined to search for potential even at the risk of becoming party to the promotion of a new orthodoxy.

For me, the freshness of sustainable development lies in the ecological dimension. Its equity aspect should be familiar terrain for socialists. I don't blame Marx for his silence on the environment, though he had some insights into it, simply because it was not an issue in his time. What I think he could be made accountable for is, among other things, his theory of freedom, which may be caricatured as shortening labor



time so that everyone can attend to the higher things in life. Imagine a brave new world where robots spare us the worry of existence while we bask on the beach. I think capitalism had a similar dream, only Marx's was more egalitarian.

In Marx's scenario, what would happen to agriculture, to the forests, to the oceans, to the atmosphere? Surely, it would be a world of plenty and equality, but probably one choking on pollution even if the best of technological fixes were invented. Perhaps the farm of my boyhood would no longer be recognizable, even if it were to survive.

If the 1960s soothed my *angst* and opened the door to the cocksure certainty of the radicals of the 1970s, the end of the 1980s left me uncertain once again. It seemed the truths for all time held only until the new ones came along.

I felt both sad and relieved when socialism in Eastern Europe collapsed. Now I have reconciled myself with the belief that it takes another revolution to undo a previous one without invalidating revolution itself. In 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Fidel Castro got most of the plaudits for saying that man is the most endangered of species. A senior member of the official Philippine delegation told me that the outcome of the Rio conference would be dictated primarily by those with the guns and resources. Socialism or revolution, I thought, was far from dead. The 1993 *UN Human Development Report* says that "90 percent of the world's people lack control over their own lives." Imagine over 5 billion souls at the mercy of 500 million. What fresh reaffirmation of what socialists have been saying all these years!

Somebody has declared the end of history. Likewise some environmentalists have written off Marxism and put themselves in the forefront instead. Long ago, I had my own questions about class theory, ceasing to believe that class struggle was the singular motor of history even in the era of class society. But I'm not about to propose a toast to a new kind of absolutism. The world has had enough of tyrants and people who have all the answers.

My desire to return to our farm sounds utopian. In a sense, it is. Nobody in my family would take me seriously – they know that I always avoided the most difficult tasks on the farm. Besides, my hometown is not exactly paradise. It's like any other place that has been touched by civilization and its legacy of poverty and pollution.



“Coming home” is symbolic, I’m just paying my dues, so to speak, and better late than never. I have no intention to say good-bye to the heady world of high tech. Neither do I wish to see my village delinked from the amenities of modern life – TV, VCRs and dreams of Disneyland. Someday I hope to see a global village, the kind my tiny society of close friends and I dreamed up years ago. There, we would live what John Lennon only imagined.

But it’s no use drumbeating my cause to the people at the top of the heap if I don’t do anything at the bottom. The farm is my metaphor for living space, space where I can at least promise to regain control over my own life.

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