

Special Contribution

Some Hopes for a New Journal on Environmental Strategies

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This is the inaugural issue of the *International Review for Environmental Strategies*. The management of its sponsoring organisation, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), has honoured me on this occasion by requesting that I contribute a brief, introductory essay outlining the expectations that I hope this journal will achieve over time. While this is an honour, it is also a daunting task. First of all, the scope of this journal, like the scope of IGES itself, involves environmental strategies at the global level. There are literally countless journals and publications specifically dedicated to global environmental issues, and there is also the well-established work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Any new journal should aim to provide added value, to achieve a “niche”, to offer what existing publications do not provide. An additional factor is that expectations for good journals are subject to evolution and even to dramatic shifts in core philosophy as a function of advances in our knowledge and the emergence of new problems and issues. This is likely to prove more the case today in a world beset by very great uncertainties. Under these circumstances, what should this new journal legitimately and reasonably adopt as its initial aims and defining characteristics and what exactly are these major uncertainties that need to be taken into account?

In his 1993 book, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, the American historian Paul Kennedy outlines the extent to which uncertainty and change are imbedded features of this new century. Against a long historical backdrop, he concludes that the speed and depth of change that we now confront are without historical precedent. Five years ago has become ancient history, and yesterday scarcely prepares us for explosions in new technologies, political juxtapositions and global disruptions the likes of which our grandparents could hardly imagine. The world of the 21st century is on history’s fastest growth track.

There are countless uncertainties (natural or anthropogenic) that accompany this growth track, but there is little serious dispute about the “facts” of the current situation. Since 1900, the world’s population has multiplied more than three times. Its economy has grown twentyfold. The consumption of fossil fuels has grown by a factor of over 30, and industrial production by a factor of over 50. Moreover, most of this growth (four-fifths of it) has occurred since 1950 and much of it is unsustainable. The indicators of unsustainability are numerous and the object of great dispute, but there is broad consensus on the following:

- (1) The human economy now consumes 40 percent of the mass of plant material produced each year by photosynthesis using energy from sunlight.
- (2) While there continue to be disputes on climate change and global warming, there is general scientific agreement that major and potentially catastrophic change is now well advanced.
- (3) The earth's ozone layer has suffered severe damage.
- (4) Thirty-five percent of land is considered degraded, and much of it has been assessed as irreversible within a human time scale. Soil loss currently exceeds soil formation rates by at least tenfold.
- (5) Loss of biodiversity is reflected in the decline of the world's richest species habitats—tropical forests—55 percent of which has already been destroyed. Today's pace of extinction is generally placed at not less than 5,000 species per year, a rate 10,000 times higher than pre-human extinction rates.
- (6) The number of poor continues to grow throughout the world. Inequality between countries is increasing from 30 to 1 (1960) to 74 to 1 (1997) and, over the same period, the richest 20 percent of the world's population increased its consumption of the world's resources from 70 to over 80 percent.

These “facts” produce dramatically different responses. At one end of the spectrum are “neo-Malthusian pessimists” (many of them biologists). They conclude that the speed of advance of modern industrial society with its weight of growing consumption of resources and environmental pollution will unavoidably produce ecological and economic turmoil. Theirs is an apocalyptic scenario which posits the collapse of civilisations and populations as the inevitable consequence of human industrial activity, perhaps followed by a regrouping at a much lower level of resource use and civilisation.

At the other extreme of the spectrum, the “technological optimists” (often economists) argue that technological advances will allow for an ever-improving base of material well-being for all of humanity. To these optimists, the many new and emerging technologies in biology, materials, construction, energy, microelectronics and other fields offer the hope for increasing food production and food security, producing energy in more sustainable ways, raising industrial output in most parts of the world, conserving the earth's basic stock of natural capital and managing the environment. There is, for example, the argument that the anti-pollution measures taken in the developed world over the past quarter century have been a stunning success and that environmental trends are mostly positive (Easterbrook 1995). In many ways this is true. The quality of certain aspects of the environment has improved significantly over the dismal baseline of several decades ago. Over the past decade, American manufacturers have reduced their releases of toxic chemicals by almost 50 percent, and the success of the Montreal Protocol in reducing chemicals that threaten the ozone layer provides at least some hope that humans can mobilise the political will to change, when the evidence of the necessity of doing so is sufficiently compelling.

Such conflicting views and diametrically opposed responses to the “facts” create an inherently difficult and uncomfortable position for policymakers and for the general public. Even growing scientific consensus on specific areas of human behaviour that are severely damaging the global environment does not prevent passionate dispute over whether effective responses are at all possible.

This is a particularly important point for researchers and for scholarship. For the most part, debates on global environmental change and how to respond have been driven and informed by scientific assessments. This holds true across the full spectrum of climate change/global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, loss of forests, arable land and of biodiversity, toxic wastes and emissions, and so on. These debates have not generally been informed by a comparable science on the human and institutional aspects of resource use and degradation. The tendency in the social sciences has been to abstract humankind from nature and only very rarely in the same equation to attempt to combine the principles and behaviours governing nature with the principles and behaviours governing people.

This observation about the segmentation of the social sciences is not at all new. What is new is the increasing sense that the segmentation is now a serious problem, especially with regard to the urgent policy guidance that is needed on the complex interactive effects of natural and social (ecological and anthropogenic) factors. This, in my view, will be a major, defining issue for social science over the next several decades. To meet the challenge will require major shifts in the current theories, methodologies, concepts and practices that place dividing walls between the individual social sciences on the one hand and between the social and physical sciences on the other. The extent of this challenge is well summarised by Nazli Choucri, who observed that: "None of the social sciences is currently directed to address human interventions in nature or the responses to intended and unintended consequences to nature due to human action. Indeed the whole issue of global change lies at the frontier of the social sciences as they are conventionally viewed" (1993).

At this time, there are not, in my judgement, adequate outlets that actively, systematically and regularly encourage this integration. Given this assessment, what I hope in the first instance for this new journal is that it should seek to occupy this important niche. It should aim to encourage scholarship that is genuinely interdisciplinary and international and that is directed specifically at the formulation of appropriate environmental strategies. This means that it should not judge itself or seek to be judged by the conventional standards of the social sciences; there are already a sufficient number of journals available as outlets to epistemologies based on those standards. Rather, this new journal should, I believe, seek to establish and associate its metrics more closely with some of the new thinking emerging in management literature on effective strategies (see, e.g., Mintzberg, Quinn and Ghosal 1998). The metrics involved in these approaches are consciously *systemic* and built on efforts to determine how the pieces of a puzzle inter-relate and add up to the larger picture.

While these metrics aspire to rigorous empiricism, this is not taken in itself as a legitimate end product. Rather, the approach acknowledges a continuous "knowledge process" whereby the process of developing strategy is far more important than any resulting single strategy. At the root of this approach to the generation and validation of knowledge is an appreciation that the key to strategy lies not just in technical matters, but in changing the mindsets of people. Applied to the national and international levels, this approach involves a highly complex process of political economy and of political accountability that can only be successful if it includes significant efforts to explain, communicate, disseminate, consult, persuade and build consensus. This approach and its metrics are clearly utilitarian, making it well suited to a journal aimed at facilitating strategies that are, by definition, also utilitarian.

These guiding principles and metrics should situate the new journal as an important forum for debate and informed discourse on the natural and human behavioural uncertainties that impede policy responses to human behaviours that damage the environment. The importance and timeliness of this approach is underscored by recent studies in the physical and biological sciences that point to the limitations of scientific methods as we have understood and practised them since the Hellenic period. These studies demonstrate the existence of nonlinear, disequilibrium dynamics (“stochastic fluctuations”) in natural systems. By analogy, increasing uncertainties are likely to render social and economic systems less predictable in the future even when the full dynamics of systems are known or when systems have no known random processes in them.

In contrast to most journals of social science, therefore, the defining feature of the *International Review of Environmental Strategies* should aim to integrate epistemologies that are currently treated as if they were separate and distinct, should encourage integrative and systemic thinking and should invite realistic portrayals of the vast ambiguities, paradoxes and policy dilemmas that are central to the natural and anthropogenic challenges of this century.

My second hope for the new journal is that the approach recommended above will allow it to influence future debates about globalisation. Opposition to globalisation has become both ferocious and organised, as recent events in London, Seattle and Washington have demonstrated. It seems certain to me that, at least for the next decade, the principal global debate and a major source of intellectual conflict will be determined by the enthusiasts and the detractors of globalisation. This will also provide the general intellectual context for global environmental discourse. This may present not only a rich menu for new scholarship on conflict, on the role of civil society and the state, and on the future of multilateralism, but also, again, a utilitarian matter of great urgency.

This is not to suggest that the journal should restrict itself to research and analysis specifically at the global level or that it should specifically eschew place-specific or local-level knowledge. Much of the current posturing about the relevance of participatory versus non-participatory methods, top-down versus bottom-up policy development and globalization versus localisation involves entirely false dichotomies. What is required is intensive and serious scholarship to increase our understanding of the complex and subtle ways in which the global and the local interact, influence one other and create new conflicts in a heterogeneous and fast-changing world.

To understand the relationships between the natural and the anthropogenic must necessarily involve place-specific appreciations of reality as a foundation stone of scholarship. But just as “micro”-based knowledge will be imperative, such knowledge is almost certain either to mislead and prove of marginal relevance to attempts to improve the human condition unless the understandings and techniques of scholarship seek simultaneously to link those micro appreciations to the larger contexts. The obverse is equally true. Globalization is no more likely to render irrelevant the importance and specificity of place than did the end of the Cold War equate—in spite of eloquent claimants at the time—to the end of history. Globalization is far more likely to reinforce the specificity of micro realities, of place, of “here” versus “there”. Again, the urgent requirement is to increase our knowledge about and understanding of those interrelationships.

The expectations for the contribution of any one journal must necessarily be modest, all the more so if the focus is on the vastly complex and subtle interface between humankind and nature, between globalisation and the environment. A respected and pioneering journal can, however, be part of and even serve to help establish an international network of quality scholarship whose participants work together on shared and complementary agendas, linking global models with local realities and learning, growing, changing and making adaptations together. Such knowledge brokering was science fiction just a few years ago but the opening up of major scholarly communities and institutions throughout the world and the coupling of these with the new information technologies makes this possible today and at relatively low cost. The new journal should seek to encourage and to nurture such connectivity of scholarship on a “virtual reality” basis. The task here, it should be emphasised, is far removed from the established practice of most of academia which involves simple information dissemination (i.e., the passive act of making information available to those who might wish to receive it). To contribute to the building of a global knowledge network will require a conscious selection of agendas, solicitation and choice of material that invites the emergence of such networks, and an explicit editorial policy setting out these purposes.

Finally, my hope for this new journal is that the approach and broad philosophy outlined above will encourage and provide an important outlet for younger scholars. Established journals (and the peer review process on which they depend) tend to reward scholarship that accords with established norms and, as we discussed earlier, to reinforce the segmentation of the social sciences. The reward and recognition norms of these journals act as disincentives to young scholars wishing to work on major problems in interdisciplinary and systemic ways. This is in no way to invite any “lowering of standards” or a reduction in intellectual rigour as such qualities will be imperative to the credibility of the journal. The application of these qualities on an integrative basis, however, is likely to open up an important avenue for fresh thinking and fresh approaches, and these may be especially attractive to younger scholars. There is, after all, the often overlooked but central role of generational divides in scholarship that Thomas Kuhn laid out in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn quotes from the physicist Max Planck: “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die” (Kuhn 1970).

These, then are my wishes for this new journal, and they are admittedly ambitious. The world is awash with publications and electronic information on almost every conceivable subject and, unless investment in a new publication aims high and seeks to provide major value-added information, such investment should probably not be encouraged. The intersectoral and systemic approach that I seek is, of course, not new. What is new is the extent to which the value of knowledge, as ordered and approached along the lines of strict disciplinarity, is currently being questioned. From governments to multilateral agencies to transnational corporations to nongovernmental institutions, to private foundations, the traditional disciplinarity of the social sciences is being found to accord inadequately with the challenges and needs of the contemporary world. In this context, sound and responsible scholarship is more important than ever, but it calls for a scholarship that grapples systemically with, for example, differing visions of the relationship between nature and humankind, the interrelationships between the environment and the transformation of markets, the consequences to the environment of unprecedented production of wealth and at the same time unparalleled social exclusion and poverty. None of the “big issues” that humanity

confronts today are uni-dimensional, and the questions of genuine importance are, in my view, intersectional. This new journal, the *International Review of Environmental Strategies* will, I hope, encourage such approaches, will contribute through them over time to the new knowledge that is required and will have a genuine bearing on future strategic choices available to policymakers.

With these objectives in view, I wish this venture every success.

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