

Tom Pegram 03:24

I'll just let the pod crew introduce themselves.

Jessica Knezy 03:28

Hello, I'm Jessica. I work on the research and social media. And I'm very excited to be part of this conversation today.

Sam Coleman 03:36

Hi everyone, I'm Sam I handle the video and audio editing. And I'd say I'm really looking forward to having a chat with Patrick today.

Zoe Varenne 03:43

Hi, I'm Zoe, I handle social media as well and a little bit of the research too.

Tom Pegram 03:49

Alright, so perhaps we can begin Patrick, by laying out the central arguments. You said that modern industrial civilization is fundamentally anti ecological, that it's on a collision course with the laws of ecology. So what are the laws of ecology? And how. how are we in violation of them?

Patrick Ophuls 04:12

I guess the basic law is the law of connection. I like Garrett Hardin's formulation of it that you can never do just one thing. Everything is connected. So whatever you do with the whole system that we call this earth, is going to have consequences and if you don't respect that, you're going to have bad consequences. I guess the second law would be or a basic ecological principle is limitation. You can only do so much to nature without having consequences. Now, I like to think of it in terms of capital and

Tom Pegram 11:16

There was a recent scientific paper that came out maybe two or three years ago, which essentially argued that the limits to growth forecast was more or less correct.

Patrick Ophuls 11:29

It got almost no attention the first copy sold millions, then the rest of them just disappeared, a minor headline on page three of the Times, and that was the end of it.

Tom Pegram 11:41

So I think Sam's got a question, over to you Sam.

Sam Coleman 11:44

Yeah so Patrick hearing you talk about that time, the 70s. It seems like there was an understanding that these messages might fall on deaf ears. Is that the case? And was there ever a kind of sense that you might be able to merge a political reality with the biophysical reality? Or was that something that you always envisioned coming into play at a later date in the future sometime?

Patrick Ophuls 12:11

Yeah, well, that gets to your third question, which "were you hopeful in the 1970s, that political reality was going to take account of it?" And I was never optimistic. In part, because I understood things in the way that Thomas Kuhn did that paradigms are so strong, but part of it was, so many people told me I was crazy. Or they say, well, ecology can't be everything you know? Well, it is everything but nobody wanted to understand that or the amount of resistance of the human mind, to a new way of seeing, we discover is almost unlimited. It really takes the school of hard knocks, to beat it into people's brains, that times have changed. And we're just beginning to reach that point where people realise that, oh, they talked about problems that might come down the pike in the future. Well, now they're knocking on the door and threatening to break it down. But still, nobody quite knows how to do it. They think "Well, okay, we have a problem with cars. So let's go to electric cars," they don't understand that electric cars aren't the solution, they're more part of the problem. You're just shifting the problem around from one sector to another, but you're not fundamentally changing the civilization to the way that will allow it to exist forever ecologically.

Sam Coleman 13:45

So do you feel like the social challenges llengt

can't go along like this. We need a different way of life." But of course, the problem is that the force of inertia number one is so hard to overcome, it's probably the major force in history inertia. And the second problem is that the implication is that a lot of us are surplus. Now, if you do back of the envelope calculations of what might be a reasonably survivable population on planet Earth, it's down around one or 2 billion not 8, 9 billion. And so that's a pretty hard, hard conclusion for people to swallow. I think we're in for a really serious time of troubles. When all these ecological and other political chickens come home to roost. I'm steadily less optimistic over the years, as I see how, how badly and how grudgingly we are, we're behaving in face of this massive, worldwide crisis.

Tom Pegrum 16:08

Given in as you're saying that, in some ways, these are kind of hard truths to swallow. What is the role of the university? What is the role of the academic at this moment of ecological peril? I mean, very notably, your 1977 book won these two awards from two very prominent associations in the discipline. And yet over 40 years later, very prominent scholars like Tom Hale, Jessica Green, are arguing that environmental politics remain marginal to mainstream international relations. So how can we understand that? What happened?

Patrick Ophuls 16:49

No, well, what happens is what happens in academia is that, it's, my book became a textbook in environmental politics. And I stress the word environmental, they were thinking in terms of, oh, not in my backyard, all those kinds of petty issues, they weren't thinking about the big picture ecologically in relationship to politics, it's just what academic disciplines do. I, I got out of academic life, because I didn't think it was very rewarding to play academic ping pong. Scholars debating among themselves on these very small issues. So that's what happens in academic life. I hope I'm not insulting you. But that's my feeling about how it operates and why after two years I left Northwestern, I didn't think I could write the kind of books that I wanted to write in an academic setting, you don't get rewarded for that. You get rewarded for all kinds of other things.

Tom Pegrum 18:01

Thanks. Thanks, Patrick. Yes, Jessica, you have a question?

Jessica Knezy 18:05

Yes. Patrick, you argue very evocatively. That political struggle is now urgently focused on making ecology, the master science and Gaia, the master metaphor of our age. So many might agree but argue that it's more practical to focus on reducing pollution, which I believe you mentioned, in regards to moving to electrical cars as a solution for greenhouse gas emissions. Why do you regard this as a fundamental misunderstanding of our predicament? And what would you say that these so called pragmatists?

Patrick Ophuls 18:40

Yeah, I think I've said earlier, the problem isn't better mousetraps, or better policies. The problem is we need a fundamental restructuring of our basic way of life, which is anti-ecological to its core and this goes way back in human history. We know now, for example, that when human beings migrated out of Africa into new areas, it didn't take too long, before they exterminated most of the megafauna after

which they evolved ways of living reasonably, reasonably ecological fact. We have simply replicated that on a massive global scale and until we until we understand that root reality, we will just be what we Americans call a day late and \$1 short in our response, we will, we will give ground grudgingly. We will make policies that reduce our carbon footprint a little bit but we won't to fundamentally reform our society. I think that's our basic situation. I keep coming back to it and I've had that view all along since I, my first encounter, of ecology. By the way, I should probably tell you the backstory to my work. I was a diplomat before I went back to school to get a doctorate, and I was in Tokyo. My embassy apartment was a quarter mile away from a large TV tower painted international orange most days of the year. I couldn't see it from our apartment. On the one day of the year when nobody drives in Tokyo, which is New Year day, you could see Mount Fuji 50 miles away. Then I went frequently back and forth between Tokyo and Yokohama. And there's a river that runs halfway through on Monday, it would be red on Tuesday it would be purple on Thursday it would be yellow. So depending on who was doing the worst polluting. Then it finally came time for me to leave Tokyo and the embassy sent me out to the Air Force hospital have my lungs tested. Because it turned out that too many people had been coming back from three, four years in Tokyo with lung damage. So that's what I brought back when I started graduate studies at Yale, I was originally going to be specialists in Japanese politics, Far Eastern policy but that just kept eating away at me I could just see. Industrial civilization is not what it's cracked up to be. That became the kernel around which were all of my work, essentially, grew.

Jessica Knezy 21:54

So, Sir, how would you say that we should dismantle our industrial society? And what would an ecologically focused society look like?

Patrick Ophuls 22:02}82}8(c)8k}838uew

really have a realistic plan for rationing, scarcity and making a transition to a different kind of environment and the economy

Tom Pegram 24:43

It's certainly a very evocative image you, you give them the boa constrictors certainly... Yeah, slowly squeezing us in this situation. Hmm. So I know Zoe has a question. Over to you Zoe.

Zoe Varenne 25:01

So some argue that one problem the West faces is that our ideas about the future are no longer relevant. And we increasingly see wisdom being sought from non-Western indigenous and spiritual traditions such as Buddhism. But in in 'Plato's Revenge,' you very much situate your response to the ecological crisis within Western philosophical thought. In your opinion, which Western ideas can and

we take Gregory Bateson seriously? Why didn't we take the Limits to Growth series? Again, I think it comes back to Kuhn and how, how strongly people resist any kind of paradigm shift.

Tom Pegram 29:20

I mean, you really take aim at the, at the kind of Newtonian mechanistic worldview. And you counterpose that to ecology as an alternative master science Gaia, as the alternative master metaphor. And then you weave a very compelling story drawing on Western philosophy from Plato on, including the founding fathers, Jefferson, and others. And I have to admit that that is not a story I'm familiar with. It was very, it was quite revelatory, how... The ecological sensibility that is hidden within Jefferson's own political thought.

Patrick Ophuls 30:06

Yes, that was that was not the dominant strain. We talked sometimes in American intellectual history about the machine and the garden. And it was Hamilton who was for the machine and essentially a majority of the the founding people in the Americas, but that garden team was always there underlying. So I think in any culture, there's always a counterculture that has ideas that are opposite and that can become relevant when the time is right. I'll change the subject a little bit here to say that the physicists themselves have resources that I think are useful for our understanding. If you look at what the physicists say about our world, it's more like Buddhism, that is your usual understanding of cut and dried science. I also think so far you haven't mentioned Jung and I think in some ways that chapter is, is in many ways a key word in my argument, and shouldn't be overlooked.

Tom Pegram 31:34

Well, perhaps, Patrick, you could actually, a couple of points of just clarification and expansion. I mean, one, I would love for you to explain a bit more. What is it that people get wrong about Plato, here, which is so important to the thrust of your arguments?

Patrick Ophuls 31:53

Well, okay, if you look at how Plato is taught, in the academy, they go to, yeah, they mentioned the

Patrick Ophuls 47:19

Yeah. And a Buddhist sense of detachment. This is this is all a play of life and we live so many lives within it, that it getting overly concerned or attached to one particular thing just isn't worth it in the larger context.