

Philosopher addresses global environmental degradation head-on

November 8 2017, by Melanie Schefft



UC philosopher and UNESCO water chair Adrian Parr discusses how to effectively break political, sustainability barrier issues with villagers and policymakers in Nairobi, Africa. Credit: Jon Hughes/Photopresse

At the heart of a new book about the future of environmental

sustainability, University of Cincinnati's Adrian Parr looks for radical, yet positive solutions through the lens of an "environmental imagination."

Parr, UC professor of environmental politics, political philosophy and cultural criticism and author of "Birth of a New Earth: The Radical Politics of Environmentalism," describes "environmental imagination" as a clever philosophical tool she uses to create a visual image of a world that works cooperatively to combat ongoing environmental degradation and massive poverty.

"Too often, environmental destruction is unintentionally enabled by well-meaning groups and political systems that support counterproductive global capitalism, corporate control and militarism," says Parr. "Here we have the human species almost on its deathbed all the while continuing to perpetuate the problem."

In the book—a philosophical investigation into how we can successfully live together as human beings with our environment and other species—she hones in on strategies that are having a positive impact, such as experiments in food sovereignty, collaborative natural-resource management and sustainable public-interest architectural design initiatives that test new models of economic principles.

Third book's a charm

In Parr's trilogy of books about the environmental crisis, she takes readers on a tour of sustainability issues beginning with "Hijacking Sustainability."

In the second book, "The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics," Parr takes her investigation one step further, exposing policymakers for repeating the same strategies that cause the problem in

the first place.

"Birth of a New Earth," third in the trilogy, sheds light on positive environmental solutions by exploring how to build positive scenarios for policymakers where political systems, corporate interests and workable collaborations actually benefit everyone.

In the book, she describes capitalistic and politically oppressive forces that, she says, are behind the continued abuse of people, animals and natural resources, and she reminds readers that fighting force with force is not always effective.

Tools for hope

As a political philosopher, director of UC's Charles Phelps Taft Research Center and one of 30 chairs of the UNESCO water project, Parr works closely with scientists in oppressed regions all over the world and points out the distinction between positive "environmental imagination" and political imaginations that are not inherently hopeful.

One such example, she says, is a reactionary imagination caused by an elite-filled political system that twists the very principles of the environmental movement. Parr says this results in overreacting, often with racist ideas.

"If you look back through history, very few people realize that Adolph Hitler was an ardent environmentalist," says Parr. "He was a vegetarian and was very worried and preoccupied about animals being hurt, meanwhile he was sending six million Jews to the gas chambers.

"Hitler's behavior toward certain groups is an example of reactionary imagination."

Parr says positive strategies that help produce an openness to diversity, emancipation from political restrictions and inclusive constituencies encourage environmental political systems to suppress ongoing violence, exploitation and oppression.

"We're not dealing with those structures, and we're not dealing with the central problem. Instead we're just slapping on Band-Aid solutions," says Parr. "This is what I've dealt with to date in the last two books, and this third book is now asking, 'How do we pause and take a deep breath? How do we open our eyes and have hope for our children, future generations and other-than-human species?'"

Water's reflection of a larger problem

Parr's environmental imagination tools recently resonated with the Heschel Center for Sustainability in Tel Aviv.



Sean Hughes, UC photojournalist, documents Parr and local townspeople on film as they discuss water and sanitation conditions in Nairobi, Africa, for "Intimate Realities of Water." Credit: Hughes/Photopresse

"In a fascinating discussion with the Israelis about their water politics with the Palestinians, they asked me what I would suggest," says Parr. "I explained the act of aiming for a kind of utopia as a formal exercise, an imaginary, if you will, that can force us to stretch ourselves beyond current conditions. To think and to imagine and experiment with inclusive options using attitudes of generosity in place of narcissism and the defensiveness of dogma.

"The starting principle is that water is something that you share, and to

do that with the Palestinians you have to start with the simple premise of friendship."

As part of her ongoing water preservation project with UNESCO, Parr followed four women closely last year through the slums of Nairobi, Africa, looking at water and sanitation facilities that were being developed.

It was this exploration that resulted in not only the award-winning documentary film, "Intimate Realities of War" but also the informative backbone for two chapters in her new book, specifically around the dark side of dignity and development. Parr produced, wrote and narrated the documentary. She co-directed with current and former photojournalism faculty Sean Hughes and Jon Hughes.

Saving "Mother Earth"

Parr leans on the work of the late American political theorist Hannah Arendt, another philosopher who used empathy as a philosophical tool to bring the public sphere together.

It is this type of common-sense approach, she says, that will bring people back together to collaborate, compromise and reach across the table.

"I don't believe in climate change, I trust in [climate change](#) science," says Parr in an earlier interview with the New York Times. "The general consensus coming from all scientific theaters is that an environmental crisis is going on that is exacerbated by political systems—those that exploit and oppress so many parts of the world—so we need to listen to that.

"My argument at its core supports the idea of reinvigorating a democratic kind of world—not a specific form of democracy—but

bringing changes to the principles of democratization that will generate equitable and inclusive ways of living so the Earth and future generations can flourish."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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