OTHER THINGS EQUAL

What's Wrong with the Earth Charter

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The Earth Charter, on the model of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights, is circulating in Green circles. You can find it with a Google search. I was invited to talk to a little conference about it in November of 2001. I think the participants were simply stunned that anyone actually *disagreed* with the Charter. Some of what's in the Charter is good and true. But the following, and I'm afraid much else, is bad and false:

"The gap between rich and poor is widening."

True only in that nations that have rejected market capitalism, such as North Korea, and India under its decades of rule by London School of Economics socialists, have stayed poor. It is false for, say, South Korea, Thailand, the Czech Republic, and for India in the past ten years of liberalization.

"An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems."

The Malthusian fear, first articulated two centuries ago, has proven false. World population has increased since 1800 by a factor of six ("unprecedented" indeed), though no serious demographer denies that economic growth *slows* population growth, and all of them expect world population to level off in the next half century or so. *But instead of resulting in impoverishment, the increase in population has been accompanied by enrichment: world income per head has increased by a factor of five*. Small families and clean air are normal goods. (In January 2002, for example, reports appeared that the Chinese were starting to control smoke emissions in their worst cities.) In many ways we have a better environment than in 1800. The worst damage to the environment has happened under non-market regimes.

"We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more."

Granted, and true essentially of countries like the United States. But basic needs have not so far been met for most of the world, and will not be if Green ideas are implemented. Basic needs can be met only through economic growth—as China, for example, has realized.

Other Things Equal, a column by Deirdre N. McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.

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Eastern Economic Journal, Vol. 28, No. 2, Spring 2002

"We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community."

Yes, we need the basic values of love, courage, temperance, justice, prudence, faith, and hope. These flourish in market societies. For instance, it was Quaker businesspeople, many of them former slave traders, who for the first time in human history questioned and then helped end slavery; environmentalism itself is a result of capitalist prosperity.

"[We need to] ensure that communities at all levels . . . provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential."

Which entails market capitalism, that is, within a community of laws, the free pursuit of full potential.

"Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations."

What best achieves serious concern for the future is private property with a good capital market. No owner of a productive forest wants to see it ravaged, for then the *present* value of her property is ravaged.

"Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term."

Which is best achieved by teaching children the value of free exchange, private property, and respect for new souls.

"Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life."

Which is to say, continue the propagation of an environmentalist religion in the public school, K-12, and extend it to colleges. Perhaps we should set up loudspeakers on every corner and broadcast the Charter.

"Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives."

We are invited to repeat the errors of socialism—that "planning" has been on the whole a good idea, and has helped the poor and the environment. Neither appears to be true. Planning supposes in a rationalistic style that we know *right now* enough to lay down the future.

"Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm."

In our state of ignorance such a burden would bring all economic progress to a halt, dashing the hopes of the world's poor to enjoy a standard of living that makes environmental concerns possible.

"Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no buildup of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances."

No buildup? Even if safely contained? The standard is here, as often in the document, imprudent in its non-economizing extremes.

"Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind."

"Efficiency" is an economic concept here misused. Pursuit of the lowest *energy* efficiency by itself will reduce other efficiencies. Often it will result in more pollution: save energy in scrubbers and get dirty air.

"Internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards."

Another economic concept misunderstood. The best way to internalize is to make private property, so that people have an interest in (say) stopping the overharvesting of Amazonia.

"Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations."

If the idea is (it is) to redistribute present wealth, it will not work because redistribution is not sustainable either practically or politically. The best redistribution is economic growth.

"Ensure that all trade supports . . . progressive labor standards."

That is, prevent workers in Bangladesh from offering goods cheaper to the poor of the United States. If one imposes the "standards" of the labor market of Chicago on Dacca, no one in Dacca will have a job. (It is the old tension between the protectionism and the internationalism of the left.)

"Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries."

The great liberatrix of women has been the market, in which a woman is not her father's or her husband's or her son's domestic slave. Cultures like ancient Greece or traditional China or traditional Islam that have prevented women from participating in economic life outside the home have not been good for their women. In northwestern Europe women could work outside the home. Which place liberated women? The Charter or the market?

You can see that I hope the Charter fails. But I am not hopeful. A document written by biologists and other activists entirely innocent of economics is of course going to have a good deal of economic nonsense. One that fails to recognize how bad the project of social engineering has been for human freedom is of course going to have a good deal of political nonsense. But since when has nonsense been a bar to the success of a manifesto, left, right, or center, Red, Blue, or Green?