



THE ARROGANCE OF MAN

Four essays by A. J. Garter

1. THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

"The confidence in his own resourcefulness which has enthused western man since the Renaissance instils in him the conviction that there are no bounds to his mastery of nature."

THE odds must now be against mankind's survival into the twenty-first century. As the hazards multiply, so do the chances of disaster. Men cannot indefinitely stockpile nuclear weapons without detonating them, lethal chemicals and bacteria without releasing them, or radioactive isotopes without becoming exposed to them. If a small quantity of dynamite explodes there may be a serious but local accident; if a minute quantity of nerve gas is let loose there may be a final and universal accident. Man has created stuff so dangerous that it must not be deliberately used, or allowed to leak out or be stolen, ever.

This is beyond man's capacity to achieve. Because human beings are not perfect, they cannot devise foolproof defences against every known contingency even in the short term (mental aberration, earth tremors, aerial bombardment for ransom?), still less prepare for the unforeseeable in the long term. Already hydrogen bombs have been mislaid and-recovered, failsafe devices have jammed, and nerve gas has escaped and dispersed, yet radioactive waste from nuclear power stations has to be shielded from human contact for hundreds of years. Plutonium, an artificial element extremely damaging to living organisms, has to be shielded for hundreds of thousands of years, a proposition so absurd that, if the manufacture of plutonium goes on, it is certain that mankind is under sentence of death.

The confidence in his own resourcefulness which has enthused western man since the Renaissance instils in him the conviction that there are no bounds to his mastery of nature. Man can assuredly work many wondrous spells, but he is so intoxicated with success that he does not know when to stop. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, he dabbles in magic whose repercussions he can no longer foretell.

Never in the past has the natural world been so abused. Throughout history the sequences of nature have been accepted as the indisputable background to human events. The ancient peoples who lived on the banks of flooding rivers farmed the fertile land with thankfulness, and out of that fertility sprang noble and enduring civilizations. What would have happened to the early Egyptians if they had diverted the course of the Nile?

The agrarian tradition is to husband the land, but industrial societies use land recklessly, squander irreplaceable metals and fuels, pollute abundantly, disturb the ecological equilibrium and imperil the condi-

tions for subsistence. The natural domain is exploited for immediate satisfaction when it should be conserved to meet perennial human needs, the earth being treated not as a capital asset but as an object of current consumption, without heed for the future. The earth is the home of the whole of mankind; as individuals we are merely tenants for our brief stay upon it. The land surface of the planet, with the atmosphere above and the minerals below, is a gift to all human beings: to those who have lived and died, to those who live now, and to those who are not yet born. Primitive peoples appreciate this, but the sophisticated are blind to it. They parcel up the earth and deliver it into ownership as if it were property, to be bought and sold like a commodity.

If natural reserves are not to be depleted, men must reconsider the sort of technology they want, the amount of energy they burn and the manner in which that energy is obtained. Attention should be given to the recycling of materials, the production of goods that last and the utilization of sources of energy that are not going to run out or jeopardize human life. It is wiser to harness the energy of the sun, the wind and the water than to unleash nuclear power which could contaminate the environment in perpetuity. Such natural methods of energy generation are suitable for the poorer developing countries and could supersede existing nuclear power programmes, so avoiding dissemination and misuse of nuclear capability and the risks inherent in storing and shifting toxic substances.

However, it may be that the industrialized countries in the west and elsewhere will have to curtail their demand for energy and their output of goods and learn to reaffirm personal attributes. The acquisition of wealth is honourable but more fittingly a means to human fulfilment than an end in itself. Happiness could be enhanced if the accumulation of goods of diminishing utility were to give way to a simpler style of living.

Ownership of the earth enables some to command what is meant for all and others to command nothing. It is the root cause of inequality among people everywhere. It is also the root cause of dissention among nations, for the nation state has its origin in the corporate ownership of territory. As some individuals have larger or more precious chunks of the earth than others, so do some nations, which they claim to be theirs by occupation and which they retain by military force. True equality of opportunity lies in the

equal rights of all human beings to the bounty of nature. Crops belong to those who cultivate them and the treasures under the ground to those who extract them, but royalties from the oil in the oil fields of Abu Dhabi should be apportioned not among the natives of Abu Dhabi, nor even among the population of the Arabian peninsula, but among the people of the world.

Today sovereignty is vested in the nation state: national governments regulate local governments but are not themselves regulated. This arrangement is not immutable, for empires may embrace many nations and cities may be states. The international order is not predestined to consist of sovereign nations (with the corollary that every nation has one voice whatever its population), nor is the only alternative a world super-state synthesized from the nation states. Rather, the aim should be to dismantle the barriers among states and encourage the association of individuals. As it is not necessary for Christian denominations to unite but only for a flowering of Christian fellowship to render the denominational divisions of no importance, so it is not the amalgamation of states that is required but the breaking down of statehood, a reversion from the concept of the sovereignty of states which direct citizens, to that of the sovereignty of individuals who elect governments.

One of the most fruitful forms of cooperation transcending national frontiers is trade, which arises spontaneously but is all too often subjected to political hindrance. Free international trade promotes the interdependence of peoples and contributes to the maintenance of peace.

(to be continued)