

*Soapboxing for the middle of
the food chain (v1.0)*

A SOUND INSTALLATION BY STEVE NORTON

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Insects: 50% population reduction, world-wide, since 1970¹

Amphibians: 40% of all species now threatened with extinction²

Birds: loss of 2.9 billion individuals in the North American breeding population since 1970³

Statistics such as the foregoing indicate that there is real trouble in the middle of the food chain. Note also that it's called a food *chain*. This metaphor implies that the elements are *linked*, and consequently, trouble in one area means trouble for all. One would think this should be obvious and that human beings might be horrified into action, but when each of these statistics were reported in the news, there was a brief flurry of consternation and then stony silence.

1

The “news” that something is wrong with our environment—that biodiversity is trending downward while pollutants, deforestation, atmospheric carbon and the average temperature of earth's climate are all trending upwards—is hardly news. Scientists working for oil companies first reported on increasing atmospheric carbon and climate temperatures in the 1950s. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, detailing the devastating environmental impact of the chemical pesticide DDT, was published in 1962. In 1970, President Richard Nixon, using an executive order, established the US Environmental Protection Agency to combat the polluted state of the air, particularly in urban areas, and rivers throughout the country.

The oil companies buried the reports of their scientists and disregarded their recommendations. The public and, ultimately, Congress took up the cause in response to *Silent Spring*. The book was a big success, read by a large portion of the public and eventually leading to the banning of DDT and other toxins in 1972 by the EPA. This paved the way for the recovery of large raptors such as the Bald Eagle which had been severely reduced in numbers largely due to its vulnerability to the effects of these toxins which gained in concentration as they traveled up the food chain. Granted by the federal government the power to enforce congressional regulation of private business, the Environmental Protection Agency focused on broad, binding guidelines for industry around levels of pollutants released into the air and waterways as well as radioactive contamination, consumer education and fuel economy targets, among other initiatives. Consequently, over the following three decades (i.e., 1970 – 2000) significant progress was made regarding the amelioration of a host of serious

local environmental issues, particularly air pollution, acid rain, and river and harbor water quality.

The issues around atmospheric carbon and the warming of earth's atmosphere have proven significantly less tractable, however. While the fossil-fuel industry managed to keep the reports of its scientists out of the public eye in the 1950s, the scientific community nonetheless managed to raise enough eyebrows among the burgeoning environmental activist community (burgeoning due in no small part to the publication of *Silent Spring*), to the point at which, in 1979, environmental government lobbyists began to sound the alarm to Congress. Consensus among the scientific community and within government began to build over the course of the 1980s. But that momentum was met with forces opposed and at least equal to it: those of neoliberalism and corporate capitalism, recently empowered and invigorated by the Reagan administration.⁴

In the early 1980s, "Deregulation" was the order of the day, justified by the ideology which stated that we should all just get out of the way and let the free market solve our problems. "Small government," another rallying cry, was cover for drastic reductions to the social safety net and public school budgets. "Privatization," as a method of achieving "small government," was sold as a way to save consumers money by bringing prices down through market competition; in practice, it accomplished neither. Instead, the profit motive was insinuated into more and more areas of public life, thus achieving the real goal: contraction of the commons and expansion of new, profitable markets.

And from 1989 to 1992, when world leaders appeared to be moving toward binding treaties on concrete carbon emissions reductions, the process repeatedly foundered, torpedoed by large nations—usually the USA or Russia, or both—who would refuse to sign on. As was later revealed by players inside the process, none of the countries wanted to sign up to take the hit to their economies required to drastically reduce emissions, but they did want to *appear* to be doing the right thing.⁵

2

In the central chapter of his book *Sites of Exposure: Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience*, philosopher John Russon develops a genealogy of the idea of "the individual" which begins, perhaps surprisingly, with the apostle Paul. Next, Russon shows how three of our most prominent social realms—cap-

italism (i.e., our economy), modern science, and Western democracy (our politics)—grew out of this construction. Then he follows their development from their beginnings as liberatory social institutions to the repressive forces we experience today.

According to Russon, the apostle Paul's conception of the 'conversion' of a person (however one construes that) implies that Christianity (or whatever road one takes) is a cultural realm that one chooses, rather than one into which one is born, like the religions (and hence the cultures) of his day, such as those of the Greeks or the Jews.⁶ Since this is a choice that any individual can make, Pauline Christianity implies that everyone, all human beings, are free—a radical position in 54 CE. Further, Russon explains that this conversion requires that free persons “adopt a critical stance toward the givenness that is one's cultural specificity;”⁷ in other words, free persons must see that the particulars of their cultural context are insufficient to bring about their self-actualization. This requires an assertion of one's individualism in opposition to one's cultural community.

2.1 *capitalism*

In the early Middle Ages, traders and merchants developed social spaces of mercantile neutrality in which merchants from around the world could engage safely in trade. By about 1400, banking and textile industries developed in Florence which operated in “an independent economic realm that was not rooted in the land-based resources of the Italian nobility and therefore not subject to their control.”⁸ Nor was this system answerable to the church. This nascent capitalism wrested socio-economic power from the church and the state, liberating “persons from [their] oppressive power, ... making possible both the institutions and practices of freedom that define modern, cosmopolitan cultural life.”⁹ Based on the notion of free enterprise among free individuals, Western capitalism began by enabling much human flourishing. But by the 1490s Spanish and Portuguese explorers had inaugurated the European colonial onslaught which would drag on for many centuries, bringing far more human misery, much of which continues to this day.¹⁰ As a process, capitalism crowns winners and rewards them with growth, and grinds down losers who are left with only their labor to sell. Russon concludes that capitalism “naturally developed into an exploitative and oppressive economic regime, producing both an exploitative relationship between owners and workers at home and an oppressive relationship between colonizer and colonized around the globe.”¹¹

2.2 modern science

Russon describes ancient science as “the brilliantly informative description[s] of the given parameters of species life, developed by Aristotle... and still at the core of [modern] biological science.” By contrast, the rest of modern science “insisted that knowledge is not simply a matter of accurate observations of the given forms of nature... but is what an indifferent mind can force nature to show about itself to the investigative eye.”¹² Russon calls this coercive relationship to nature “instrumentality.”

It seems safe to associate Russon’s instrumentality with Max Weber’s *instrumentally rational social action*, which Weber describes as “determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends.” This Weber contrasts with *value-rational social action*, which is described as “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its own prospects of success.”¹³ While value-rational action reminds one of what Russon describes as a calling of conscience, instrumentally rational action is disturbingly untethered to any moral calculus, implying that merely *the ability* of any individual to pursue any expected outcome in service of her or his “rationally calculated ends” is justification enough to do so.

Russon observes that, as Western society develops following the Enlightenment, this scientifically-based instrumentality becomes “the norm governing knowledge.”¹⁴ Which is to say that as science increasingly became the epistemological framework for understanding the world, its values became absorbed as the moral basis for how we conducted our interactions with the world. And because its values are rooted in a murky amoral instrumentality, modern science has now “given rise to a regime of technological practice—itself the handmaiden to capitalist economic growth—that... is destroying the natural world. Modern science is based on the denial of the ultimate worth and integrity of the given forms of nature [i.e., species, for instance], treating them as merely material to be subordinated to human desires...”¹⁵ This instrumentality, “furthermore, governs how we treat ourselves in this context just as much as it governs how we treat our object. The formless object is a resource for persons who are themselves treated as formless; that is, we are understood as people who do not have a given nature that specifies our desires (as an ancient species-centered naturalism would pre-

sume), but instead have undetermined free wills and are able to specify for ourselves our desires and goals.”¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, as we instrumentalize the world, so are we also unwittingly instrumentalizing ourselves.

2.3 *Western democracy*

Russon tells us that our modern democratic forms of government were rooted in seventeenth century philosophy and the French and American revolutions of the eighteenth century, a form of government with its basis in “the universal inclusion of rights-bearing individuals *as such* in the shaping of the government.”¹⁷ (One can of course immediately see the yawning gap between the stated ideal and our realities in practice.) By constructing a separate, governmental social sphere, individuals are thence freed of repressive authority from the church, for instance, or the aristocracy. Further, because of the separability of religion from culture implied by the teachings of Paul (see above), rights-bearing individuals freed of religious and economic repression are now free to in effect *create* their own communities, if they are thus motivated.¹⁸

Of course, it may happen that the free individual in the Western democracy is not necessarily motivated or possibly even equipped for such a task. Many generations of such freedom and equality have produced “an equality only of empty, normless indifference, rather than a rich world of human flourishing.” Democracy recognizes “our creativity, our having possibilities for self-definition... that exceed[s] the terms of our given actuality.” This is a requirement of a non-oppressive regime. “However, this recognition of our essential ‘non-belonging’ to any determinacy fails to acknowledge the ways in which this very character of subjectivity is itself necessarily embedded.” In other words, human subjectivity only always develops within a cultural context. This context, or specificity, becomes the ‘home’ from which the subject imagines its further possibilities; without it, we cannot become ourselves.¹⁹ In this failure to recognize this specificity of the individual, which amounts to her or his worth, as Russon says, “we can see how modern notions of political equality can in fact be used as a dishonest tool for political oppression.”²⁰

2.4 *Russon conclusion*

It is our hope to have demonstrated, in this brief sketch, how the idea of the free individual gave rise to, as Russon says, the “political, the economic, and the scientific stances of modernity... [all of which] equally share an implicit commitment to the ultimacy of instrumentality, despite their opposite

intention to recognize individuals as ends”²¹ rather than as means. These social realms “ultimately imagine a humanity stripped of qualities, a humanity of persons who are indifferent place holders, interchangeable with—‘equal to’—each other in principle, and therefore significant *only* insofar as they are indifferently interchangeable.”²²

3

Hopefully it is abundantly clear that John Russon’s claims regarding instrumentality and its effect on present-day Western society are not exaggerated. Our fossil fuel industry, despite being fully cognizant of the consequences of their actions, are adamantly opposed to any curtailment of extractive production, to such a degree that they would hire corruptible scientists to write false reports and use these to sow doubt amongst politicians and the public. (Here, taking a page from the tobacco industry’s playbook in the 1960s in response to the rash of lawsuits which brought that industry to its knees.)²³ Our chemical industry is equally heedless regarding the toxic effects of its products on our environment. Agricultural effluents run into and poison streams and rivers, pesticides continue to kill insects, birds and amphibians—all of this is known but, well, there’s money to be made.

Gains in regulatory controls made through the 2000s have been eroded, and particularly rapidly during the current administration (we write this in 2020), which has been appallingly hostile to any notion of regulation, appointing directoral foxes to guard the regulatory hen-houses and aggressively opening up national park properties and wildlife preserves to extractive industries. Any action which appears possibly detrimental to business is viewed dimly, while a significant portion of the voting public seems to believe that supporting anti-regulatory candidates will benefit them financially. Money, of course, is the ultimate value in this society, so what we are left with is a dramatically impoverished culture imposed upon subjectivity by capitalism, materialized in commerce and driven to convincing us that each one of us, individually, is all that matters, and that by buying things we will be happy and vividly individualistic.

The result of this is an ethically degraded, oligarchical power structure run by the wealthiest of our society who behave as though *they* are, indeed, all that matter, and although cognizant of the ecological consequences their actions, consider those consequences a matter of tertiary importance at best. They are heedless of and hostile to the wishes of the public. Given their

knowledge of the consequences of their actions, these actions are unconscionable. In the words of writer and activist Ashley Dawson, “such behavior should be seen frankly for what it is: a crime against humanity.”²⁴

4

Soapboxing for the middle of the food chain is a sound installation which presents the sounds of singing insects, birds and anurans (i.e., frogs and toads), focusing on the familiar sounds of locally audible species. Additionally, there will be heard the unfamiliar sounds of insects, both terrestrial and aquatic, plus sounds of other aquatic creatures, gathered via contact microphones and hydrophones (underwater microphones). These reveal the unheard world of insects hidden away in leaf litter and creatures under the surface of bodies of water—a mysterious world about which far less is known compared to that of our airborne sound world. There is still so much to learn! And yet we are running out of time.

At the very beginning of the World Wildlife Fund’s *Living Planet Report 2020*, released in September of that year,²⁵ we read the following: “The global Living Planet Index continues to decline. It shows an average 68% decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish between 1970 and 2016.”²⁶ This figure, focused on wild vertebrate animals, glosses and amplifies the statistics in the introduction of this essay, lending yet additional urgency, as if such was needed. Not that additional urgency will amount to real action, it would seem, given our track record.

But unfortunately, and notwithstanding our unwillingness to take action, it is a fact that we human beings need immediately to cease our instrumental plundering of the non-human world and realize that our ecosystem is kept in balance by laws which we flout at our mortal peril. Regardless of our efforts to dominate nature, and our conviction that in these efforts we are successful, we will ultimately be answerable to those laws; they do not answer to us. Or, as Rachel Carson has said, “man’s endeavors to control nature by his powers to alter and to destroy would inevitably evolve into a war against himself, a war he would lose unless he came to terms with nature.”²⁷

NOTES

1. Damian Carrington, “Insect apocalypse’ poses risk to all life on Earth, conservationists warn.”
2. P.J. Bishop, et al. “The Amphibian Extinction Crisis - what will it take to put the action into the Amphibian Conservation Action Plan?” See table 1.
3. Kenneth V. Rosenberg et al. “Decline of the North American avifauna.”
4. These first three paragraphs of section 1 are deeply indebted to Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change*.
5. For sources for this paragraph, see “Afterword: Glass-Bottomed Boats” in Rich, *Losing Earth*.
6. John Russon, *Sites of Exposure: Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience*, 81.
7. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 84.
8. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 88.
9. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 89.
10. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 94.
11. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 95.
12. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 89–90, emphasis in original.
13. Max Weber, *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology*, 24–25.
14. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 90. Also, here, cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 33.
15. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 95.
16. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 90.
17. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 91.
18. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 92.
19. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 96–97.
20. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 98.
21. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 99.
22. Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 97.
23. Although he does not directly cite it, Nathaniel Rich, in the section “A Note on the Sources” of his book *Losing Earth*, lists Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway’s *Merchants of Doubt* among books which “deeply informed [his] discussion of industry’s involvement in climate politics.” (See p. 206.)
24. Ashley Dawson, *Extinction, A Radical History*, 94.
25. Sophie Lewis, “Animal populations worldwide have declined nearly 70% in just 50 years, new report says.”
26. WWF’s *Living Planet Report 2020*, 6.
27. Rachel Carson Biography, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website, accessed January 27, 2021 at: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Rachel_Carson/about/rachelcarson.html, ¶ 11.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Steve Norton is a sound artist and musician. His artistic research examines electroacoustic music, improvisation as a method, the environment, modernity and society.

Steve's practice is currently focused on the gathering of field-recorded sound which he utilizes in electroacoustic composition and performative contexts. His interest is to increasingly bring the outside world into his work via field recording and topical decisions which engage critical issues.

Steve has been exhibiting, composing and performing in the United States and Canada for over 30 years, and has a dozen installations and over twenty-five recorded releases to his credit. He holds an MFA in Intermedia from the University of Maine.

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