

## Birdsong, wilderness and bio-fuels

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**A North American wren**

<http://slybird.blogspot.com/2008/07/winter-wren-is-multiple-species.html>

By chance. these few words from a piece in *Eurekalert*, recently caught my eye: "... wildlife habitat, particularly that of the birds who call this country's grasslands home, is threatened" – threatened by the rapidly expanding production of crop based bio-fuels. The article is at once richly informative and suggests imaginative solutions. Look it up if you're interested: *In search of wildlife-friendly biofuels: could native prairie grasses be the answer?*

[http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2009-10/mtu-iso092909.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2009-10/mtu-iso092909.php)

I was reminded of two older books – one published almost fifty and the other a hundred and fifty year ago. Both are pioneering works that all green activists should know a little about.

### ***Silent Spring***

Rachel's Carson's now classic *Silent Spring* has an evocative and beautiful title that laments the disappearance of birdlife from rural America wherever a chemical intensive modern industrial agriculture colonises ground and poisons wildlife habitat. The disappearance of birdlife means the disappearance of birdsong: *silent spring* follows. Worldwide bans and restrictions on the profligate use of DDT and other agricultural chemicals found their inspiration in this book.

Older activists recognise a foundational presence in Rachel Carson. No Hollywood icon like Erin Brockovich, Carson was a retiring figure in the hostile pro-growth America of the 1960s full of grand plans for the conquest nature. Yet, and whether they know it or not, toxics and food activists are hugely indebted to her. She has inspired such contemporary classics as *Our Stolen Futures* and *Fast Food Nation*. Carson is also credited with kickstarting the state's serious involvement in environmental protection – and the establishment of the US EPA.



### Rachel Carson: from the opening pages of *Silent Spring*

“Along the roads, laurel...and alder, great ferns and wild flowers delighted ... countless birds came to feed on the berries and seed heads... The countryside was famous for the abundance and variety of its birdlife..... There was a strange stillness. The birds – where had they gone... the few birds seen anywhere were moribund. They trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices... only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh... The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials.”

We look at state environmental protection agencies today and think “weak” or “compromised” and then we lean against them with all of our weight and shout at unyielding ministerial doors in an attempt to shift them just a little. How hard is that? Well, imagine creating them in the first place. Rachel Carson kept doing the only thing any of us can do: she kept leaning and metaphorically shouting no matter what... and no matter how difficult public and private life both were for a female dying from protracted cancer in middle age and widely rumoured to be a lesbian in a homophobic society.

In posthumous essay, she referred to the "lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world... available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea and sky and their amazing life." For harboring such unamerican thoughts, the US Secretary of Agriculture accused her of "probably being a Communist". It always hides a multitude of sins!

### *Principles of Political Economy*

The second book is JS Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* and in particular the chapter entitled “The Stationary State”. Mill would have been hauled before the House of Unamerican Activities Committee had he lived in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century as a liberal turned socialist. But he lived in a more tolerant 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. His *Principles* was published in 1848 just as classical political economy was becoming a much more inward looking neo-classical economics – the form liberal economics takes today.

Whatever the continuities, at the heart of this transition lay the abandonment of a question that had pre-occupied classical political economy and its

socialist critics from beginning to end: what *value* did things have that lead us to pay particular prices for them? Classical political economists had sought the answer in some combination of capital, labour and land. Marx criticised them harshly and said it was all labour. Neo-classicals then came along and essentially dismissed the question, arguing that value was disclosed in price and simply reflected an inner appreciation located mysteriously within the consumer him or herself.

This was deeply regressive. It was no longer possible to argue that prices deviated from value – including those prices called interest, wages and rent that we paid for the capital, labour and land. Conservatives loved this because it demolish any case suggesting the exploitation of labour

There was another critical consequence: economic theory rendered itself incapable of grappling with questions of objective environmental value or importance. The possible abusive exploitation of labour and nature disappeared together from the horizons of liberal economic thought. The stage was ideologically set to let a still infant industrial economy rip. But Marx too missed the boat here. His labour theory of value supported a critique of human exploitation but not of the exploitation of nature. The shocking environmental abuses of later socialist states were partly, and almost unreflectively, legitimated in this way.

Nor did Keynes engage with these problems. Like many intuitionists, he was a soft Marx. The market was not self-regulating but it could be guided and made to work by a benign state. Marx judged it has hopelessly compromised – partly because he looked upon a very different state. But the finite planet was outside of the purview of both. The idea of a green stimulus package a green demand management would have been surprising to him. In our time he may well have embraced it.

This green critique of value theory is based on unpublished work (my own) experimentally undertaken some 20 years ago. (Then it took me 100s pages to reach such simple conclusions.) But I still think that value is at the bottom of it, ultimately accounting for why we are drowning in nonsensical carbon prices and assessments of climate change costs more generally. The planet has no objective value within the frame of contemporary economic theory. Hardly a contemporary, Mill, nevertheless stands out here.

He still worked in the old objective-theory-of-value school but was also an exceptional figure within it. He was the first economist ever to look upon human artifice in its totality and to see its aggressive ugly side not just in relation to the abuse of humans but in relation to the abuse of the natural world. He saw horizons that could be reengineered. This allowed him to ask questions that would, in a sense, not be asked until Rachel Carson came along, mourning the possible loss of birdsong. Or, perhaps, until a contemporary ecological economics was born later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



“Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation... every flowery waste ploughed up... all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man’s use exterminated as his rivals for food... every superfluous tree rooted out and scarcely a place left where a wild flower or shrub could grow.”

From Chapter 4 of JS Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*

[http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3225/2833994816\\_ecc9d7a532.jpg](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3225/2833994816_ecc9d7a532.jpg)

This almost mimics a romantic poetry of protest that Mill would have been reading and that’s where modern environmental concern was born. But Mill rendered the protest as economic theory and asked: won’t the natural world at some point just run out, putting an end to further growth? His answer to this question was an emphatic “Yes”. Other classical political economists had asked this question before but what set Mill apart was his answer.

Where others saw only unfolding tragedy as they contemplated capitalism without growth, their despair cheered his soul. Whatever one makes of his technical argument, he theorised a benign and even superior **stationary state**. From this vantage point, he scorned economic growth. This was utterly remarkable – and it set his argument apart from everyone’s – his fellow classical political economists, the neo-classicals and even orthodox Marxism.

A few more snippets of what he said:

I confess, I am not charmed with the ideal held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; trampling, crushing, elbowing and treading on each other’s heels are not the most desirable lot of human kind or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress.

The world of trampling and crushing is for fools. Just what Mill says too:

Where minds are coarse, they require coarse stimuli, and let them have them. In the mean time, those who do not accept the present very early stage of human improvement as its ultimate type may be excused for being indifferent to the kind of economic progress which excites the congratulations of ordinary politicians – the mere increase of production and accumulation.

Were words ever more scornful: “disagreeable symptoms”, “coarse stimuli” and “mere increase of production and accumulation”? Our politicians remain “ordinary”, too. The fine and elaborate prose tells us this was written over 150 years ago, but the content is for our time. Or have we not caught up with Mill?