

Plundering as a Path to Exterminism.

Fairfield Osborn on Natural Productive Forces

The ecological crisis did not just emerge in the 1970s. Even before the publication of the Club of Rome in 1972: *The Limits to Growth*, environmental degradation was already the subject of several relevant publications. One should recall, for example, the book *Our Plundered Planet*, published in the immediate post-war period in 1948 by Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr.

Osborn lived from 1887 to 1969. He studied biology at Cambridge University, worked for a few years in business, then from 1935 as secretary and from 1940 to 1968 as president of the New York Zoological Society, now known as the Wildlife Conservation Society. After the publication of his book *Our Plundered Planet*, he became well-known and influential in the environmental movement of the time. He made a name for himself in part through his early advocacy against pesticides. He became involved in campaigns against species extinction and for environmental and nature conservation. In addition, he revisited the Malthusian theory of population and advocated responsible use of natural resources and against the depletion of soils by industrialized agriculture. In addition to his advocacy of controlled growth of the world's population, his activities in conservation and environmental protection are of lasting value.

When Fairfield Osborn wrote his book, the world population had just reached two and a quarter billion people. He was concerned about man's murderous tendency to destroy more and more areas and habitats, turning them into barren, desolate, dead land. In the first part of his book, Osborn explains how man has become the new geological force shaping the earth. As mankind has grown, the available productive soil as a basis for food production has not increased; on the contrary, vast tracts of land have been destroyed by erosion. He refers to the water, soil, and plant and animal life that make up the entire system of nature as the productive forces of nature that also make industrial life possible (cf. Osborn, p. 48). Due to human intervention, large areas of formerly fertile soil have been destroyed by surface erosion, with a common cause being the overuse of pasture land, slash-and-burn agriculture, and the expansion of fields. All of these are civilizational imbalances that disrupt natural relationships and are hostile to life. For Osborn, a "principle of relativity" operates in nature, which he calls "the relatedness of all living things" (ibid., p. 60). He illustrates this principle with the benefits of insects pollinating or fertilizing plants, and describes the consequences of chemicals, including the use of DDT (see ibid., pp. 60). In view of these and other consequences, the author sees the need for "earth-wide planning" in order to protect what can still be protected and to recultivate as much as possible what has already been destroyed. Man's blindness to the need to cooperate with nature leads to the destruction of the sources of life. (ibid., p. 37) This blindness must be overcome.

On the impact on humans, he notes: "Wherever nature's balance is too greatly disturbed, accelerated erosion occurs, and man is continually upsetting the balance of nature, because of what he considers his immediate need not looking even a few years into the future; or because of ignorance or greed." (Osborn, p. 51).

In the second major section of his book, he addresses man as the plunderer of the planet, taking stock by continent and country. With increasing population, but even before that with the nomadic way of life, there was increasing and permanent degradation of soil fertility and erosion. With the loss of workers and maintenance of irrigation systems and agricultural terracing in Syria, with the onset of warlike conquests, the land eroded, cities disintegrated, and deserts emerged. Other case studies, such as those on Greece and Egypt, show the problems caused by overuse and overexploitation of natural productive forces.

Fairfield Osborn does not regard these processes as fated and inevitable, but sees them as fundamentally solvable if one works peacefully with nature and learns to address the problems at the first signs:

„The handling of first causes ... may be considered as a sort of friendly relationship, the forestalling of difficulties before they occur, the getting along with nature, instead of fighting with her after she is in revolt. Man must somehow, before it is too late, realize that he is a part of nature, and that nature is not his enemy, for it is only by adjustment to the processes of nature that man, like all other living creatures, can establish a friendly balance that will make life on this planet possible for generations not yet born." (Osborn, pp. 146)

This cautionary advice, whether from Osborn or others, has been familiar to the journalistic, scientific, and political public for at least 70 years.

"There is only one solution: Man must recognize the necessity of cooperating with nature. He must temper his demands and use and conserve the natural living resources of this earth in a manner that alone can provide for the continuation of his civilization. The final answer is to be found only through comprehension of the enduring processes of nature. The time for defiance is at an end." (Osborn, p. 201)

In the meantime, the environmental problems linked to the climate crisis have been growing significantly. Despite all the warning voices and the basic awareness of the problems, no decisive political and economic measures have been taken that are sufficient to deal with the crisis. With the dominance of short-term economic profit thinking and the fixation of much of the Western population on consumerism, a turnaround is still not in sight.

References

Osborn, Fairfield, 1948: Our Plundered Planet. Boston (Little, Brown and Company). – URL: https://ia801908.us.archive.org/14/items/dli.ernet.29002/29002-Our%20Plundered%20Planet_text.pdf