

# New Options

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Issue No. Sixty-six

## It's Overdue! — An Income Tax That's Simple and Fair

By April 16 most of us had had it up to here with our outrageously complex and unfair tax system. But we didn't riot, like they did in Britain this year. We simply sat on our anger, not knowing quite what to do with it — for now.

Fear of our anger had, after all, prompted the politicians to pass the much ballyhooed Tax Reform Act of 1986. And what good did that do, really? According to the Gallup poll, Americans by lopsided margins feel that the tax system is *more* complicated and *less* fair now.

### Complex and unfair

Our tax laws certainly aren't fair. Thanks to all the deductions, exemptions, "adjustments" and "credits," the system still taxes many high-income Americans at lower rates than the less well-off. For example, you can deduct up to \$100,000 for home mortgage interest payments, but try deducting anything for rent. If you work in an office or factory, you can't deduct the cost of a peanut butter sandwich, but your boss can write off 80% of the cost of his or her "power lunch."

The system has become complicated beyond belief. In 1913 the personal income tax return had two pages of accompanying instructions. This year it had 48. (And try reading them!) In the 1950s only 10-15% of us sought professional help to complete our tax returns. This year it was nearly 60%.

The Tax Reform Act was supposed to simplify things, but two tax experts — Jerome Ellig of Citizens for a Sound Economy and Alvin Rabushka of the Hoover Institution — separately lamented to NEW OPTIONS that the new tax law only made things worse. "In principle" the Tax Reform Act looks more fair, says Daniel Nagin of Carnegie Mellon University, but in practice it doesn't work out that way "because mortals cannot administer it."

The monumental unfairness and complexity of the tax laws creates a monumental

amount of resentment; partly as a result, we lose \$50 to \$100 billion a year from cheating and outright noncompliance. In addition, the tax laws contribute mightily to our alienation from government and public life. It's as clear as day: If we don't trust or understand the tax collection process, we're not going to think kindly about what government does or can do.

### Three voices

The tax laws are the product of two voices, neither of them functional as we enter the 21st century.

One voice is that of selfishness and greed — or, more politely, shortsightedness. It was epitomized for me earlier this month by a top corporate lobbyist, Mark Bloomfield. In an appearance before the Congressional Study Group, Bloomfield — "Mr. Capital Gains," as he's known on the Hill — argued forcefully that lowering the capital gains tax rate would immediately increase investment in the U.S. economy. But when he walked up to a group of us afterwards, and one of us asked him whether lowering the capital gains rate would increase investment *in the long run*, he smiled and said he didn't really know. He thought so, he said. He certainly hoped so.

The second voice is that of the demagogue — or, sometimes, that of the old New Deal liberal. Unlike the first voice, it is concerned with fairness. But it defines "fairness" as steeply progressive tax rates, even though we've learned by now that relatively high rates simply mean that rich (and even not-so-rich) people will pay lawyers and accountants to find "tax shelters" for them, leaving everybody worse off.

A third voice, faint but distinct, is beginning to emerge. It completely crosses ideological lines, taking in some of the work of neo-libertarian economists like Ellig and Rabushka, mainstream economists like Harvard's Lawrence Lindsey (author of *The*

*Growth Experiment*, 1990), and Greenish scholars like Herman Daly and John Cobb Jr. (authors of *The Common Good*, 1989).

These thinkers don't have a unified program. But you can derive one from their work. Put their ideas together and you can envision: a flat tax that would apply only after you'd earned enough to meet your basic needs; a postcard-sized tax return that would be the epitome of simplicity; an end to the regressive corporate and social security taxes; and a series of estate and excise taxes that would put social responsibility firmly into the tax system.

It all hinges on a redefinition of fairness.

### Levelling or community?

Until now, "fairness" in the tax system has been synonymous with steeply progressive rates. The assumption is that the more equal we can make everybody's incomes, the fairer things will be.

Daly used to think that way. In the 1970s he was a prominent advocate of maximum and minimum levels of income. But in his new book, he and Cobb stress not levelling but community. Fairness no longer means cutting the prosperous down to size, but making sure everyone's basic needs are met.

"In a true community," they write, "the basic needs of all are met so far as the community can do so. This . . . has been characteristic of traditional village life."

For Lindsey, too, fairness means that "low- and moderate-income taxpayers must be allowed to obtain the necessities of life, by modern American standards, before we treat any significant portion of their income as discretionary and tax it away."

These reflections on fairness represent something genuinely new under the sun.

For many decades, the U.S. has been polarized between those who believe in an "egalitarian" society and those who believe that inequality is a necessary source of productivity

and individual striving for excellence. In the 1960s, the pendulum swung in the direction of the egalitarians; currently it's swinging (some might say, flying) in the opposite direction.

Daly, Lindsey and others are early exponents of what is, in effect, a third position: Inequality is okay and even socially useful so long as everyone is able to meet their basic needs. This position is significant and exciting because it appears to incorporate the legitimate concerns of both sides in the traditional debate.

### Flat tax

If the centerpiece of a Great Society type tax plan would be steeply graduated tax rates, and the centerpiece of a conservative plan would be making the poor pay relatively more and the rich pay relatively less, then the centerpiece of a post-liberal, post-conservative plan might be . . . the flat tax.

Under the flat tax, everyone would be taxed at exactly the same rate. Under a post-liberal, post-conservative flat tax, there'd be a personal exemption high enough to permit everyone to meet their basic needs *before contributing a cent* in taxes.

Rabushka proposed a widely-discussed flat tax plan in the early 1980s. One big problem with it, for our purposes, is that the personal exemption is very small: \$3,800 for singles. Lindsey recently proposed a flat tax plan with a personal exemption of \$6,000 for each adult, \$3,000 for each child, and \$2,000 for each child under four years of age.

We would drop Lindsey's exemptions for children. (This country isn't exactly suffering from underpopulation.) But we would raise the personal exemption to \$15,000 — our sense of what a person needs (in this country today) to meet their basic needs without the help of further tax breaks. Note that a family of four with two young children would pay no tax on its first \$22,000 under Lindsey's plan; on its first \$30,000, under ours.

Lindsey's plan taxes income at a single rate of 19%. He claims we'd raise just as much in personal income taxes as we do today. But he'd *preserve* the corporate and social security taxes (both notoriously regressive). And his personal exemptions are still so small that many working- and middle-class people would pay *more*, under his scheme, than they do today.

That's not the case with our plan. We'd *eliminate* the corporate and social security taxes (see below), give every adult a personal exemption of \$15,000, and tax all income over \$15,000 at a single rate of 38% — not too different from the marginal rate most of us pay now (28% + 7.5% social security + whatever part of the corporate tax gets passed on to us

as a sales tax). The tax would be "flat," but its impact would be progressive thanks to the big personal exemption.

Just consider: A single person making \$15,000 would pay no taxes. Someone making \$20,000 would have a taxable income of \$5,000 and would pay \$1,900 — 9.5% — in taxes. Someone making \$30,000 would pay 19% in taxes. Someone making \$50,000 would pay 27%. Someone making \$100,000, 32%.

### Simple tax

The reason we'd be able to accomplish all this at such a reasonable tax rate is we'd eliminate personal deductions.

In other words: Our tax system would be *simple* as well as flat and fair.

As it is today, the income tax exempts *over half of personal income from taxation*, thanks to the crazy-quilt of deductions, exemptions, tax "benefits" and tax "credits" that are permitted under the tax code.

Our tax plan would also exempt a great deal of this nation's collective personal income from taxation: 43%, to be exact. But only because that's what we collectively earn *under \$15,000*.

Apart from the personal exemption, Ellig would permit three deductions: for charitable contributions, contributions to IRAs, and interest on home mortgages.

Lindsey would permit the same three, but with friendly amendments. The charitable deduction would double for contributions over 5% of income, "establishing a new social standard — the half-tithe — for all Americans to strive for." IRAs would become Individual Savings Accounts, helping us pay for education and health as well as retirement. And the home ownership deduction would be limited to \$5,000 of real interest payments per adult taxpayer.

Daly and Cobb would retain or adopt deductions for: taxes and repairs on the home, charitable gifts and activities, "expenses necessary for earning a living," and "small gifts to politicians, since these at least somewhat decrease their dependence on large donors."

Even *with* the deductions above, our tax return could — as Rabushka likes to say — fit on a postcard, and the instruction manual would be two pages long.

But we think the very generous personal exemption built into our plan should substitute for *all* deductions. Once you start giving them out, you can never really stop.

### Not just simple

Although the flat tax is instantly appealing because of its fairness and simplicity, it has many other qualities to recommend it.

"Complicated taxes require expensive advisors for taxpayers and equally expensive re-

view and audit by the government," says Rabushka — who estimates the total tax keeping, collecting and auditing bill at over \$10 billion a year now.

The flat tax "prevents politicians from substituting indirect tax increases for direct ones," says Ellig. Lindsey makes a related point when he says, "With a flat tax there would be no such thing as loophole[s] for different socio-economic groups]. . . . When the politicians play divide-and-conquer we all lose."

But David Keating, vice president of the National Taxpayers Union, may have made the essential point when he said, in testimony before the Treasury Department, "A simplified flat rate tax would make the cost of government better understood. Citizens could more easily evaluate . . . whether a proposed new program would be worth the tax increase."

We'd go even further than Keating: We think a simple flat tax would make *government itself* better understood, and encourage more of us to monitor — and seek to participate in — its decisions.

### Demagogue's tax

A simple flat tax of 38%, coupled with increases in some other taxes (see below), would permit us to eliminate the corporate and social security taxes.

We think both taxes are extremely regressive and are useful mainly to demagogic politicians.

The corporate income tax has critics now across the spectrum — including liberals like Lester Thurow and Greens like Daly.

"Many people, including the man on the street, think [the corporate tax] is a way to tax the rich," says Thurow. "This is simply a mistaken perception. . . . There is no such thing as taxing corporations as opposed to in-

*Continued on page eight, column one . . .*

## NewOptions

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Editor: Mark Satin

Assistants: Sherri Schultz, Holly Segal, Caroline Udall

Bookkeeper: Leslie Plant

Business Consultants: Richard Perl, Roger Pritchard

Design Consultant: Baker Johnson

Printer/Mailer: Newsletter Services, Inc.

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## Twelve conferences, one movement

Pack your bags. Summer's almost here, and so are some of the most challenging and substantial conferences you ever attended.

Every June through September, North America is abuzz with dozens of underpublicized conferences bringing people together around the kinds of ideas we've been discussing in *NEW OPTIONS*. Every spring we designate 12 of them as "can't-miss," and every fall we get letters from some of you telling us what a great time you had.

And this year we've only chosen conferences where registration fees are *under \$350*.

So pack your bags, see for yourself. . . .

### Getting started

- A good place to start is with the Calif. Self-Esteem Task Force's first national "summit conference," **Toward a State of Esteem** (May 31-June 1, Sacramento). All workshops will be moderated by members of the Task Force (yes, the same one lampooned by Garry Trudeau's now too often tritely liberal *Doonesbury* comic strip); topics will include "Promoting Education," "Reducing Poverty and Welfare Dependency," and "Affirming Under-represented Minorities." Speakers will include Jack Canfield (*NEW OPTIONS* #42) and John Vasconcellos (#27). *Task Force, 1130 "K" St., #300, Sacramento CA 95814, 916-322-0236*.

- Now that you're ready for anything, fly out to Kansas for **The Future of Prairie Communities** (June 1-3, near Salina), "a celebration of the prairie ecosystem and prairie folk" put on by Wes and Dana Jackson of The Land Institute (#23, 55). Presenters will include a raft of Kansas activists, professors and media people, as well as folks like Marty Strange of the Center for Rural Affairs (#55) and Bob Swann and Susan Witt of the Schumacher Society (#12). *Land Institute, 2440 E. Water Well Rd, Salina KS 67401, 913-823-5376*.

- No rest for the weary. Change into your city clothes and fly to Boston for the seventh annual **Management and Community Development Institute** (June 4-9), where community organizers that could have stepped out of a Harry Boyte or Bill Berkowitz book will be offering 44 one- and two-day courses. Among them: "Creating a Neighborhood Blueprint," "Developing Democratic Organizations" and "Building Multicultural Coalitions." *MCDI, Lincoln Filene Ctr, Tufts Univ., Medford MA 02155, 617-381-3549*.

- Then it's off to San Francisco for the

1990 **National Organization for Women Conference** (June 29-July 1). It will choose a new team of national officers — and some candidates will be wanting NOW to help set up a national third party along the lines of the West German Greens. Petra Kelly, German Green member of Parliament, has just been confirmed as a plenary speaker. *NOW Conference, 1000 16th St. N.W., #700, Washington DC 20036, 202-331-0066*.

### What is real wealth?

- If the NOW conference isn't your cup of tea, you might enjoy **How Shall We Live?** (June 26-30, Colorado), billed as "an intensive in deep ecology and the personal path." "Our goal is to establish the group as a community of peers," the presenters write. "[We'll be asking such questions as,] What is real wealth? Can we slow down and remain effective?" Presenters will include Bill Devall (#12), Brian Swimme (#29) and Elizabeth Roberts, a student of Thich Nhat Hanh (#42). *Naropa Inst., 2130 Arapahoe Ave., Boulder CO 80304*.

- Once you've asked yourself "What is real wealth?" you'll be ready for the two Texas conferences. The first, **The Voice of the People for a Change** (July 6-8, Houston; note the double entendre), is the first U.S. conference of The Other Economic Summit (TOES; see #50), and yes, it is being deliberately held just before the annual meeting of the world's seven richest nations, also in Houston. The themes will be "Ecological Economics," "Democratizing Economics" and "Needed Global Changes," and events will include everything from a "populist leaders' summit" to testimony from representatives of the world's seven *poorest* nations to workshops led by most of the economists mentioned in #50. *TOES, 1442 Harvard St. N.W., Washington DC 20009*.

- If you're hungry for more, scoot up to **Community Empowerment for the Ecological Age** (July 11-15, near Dallas) — the ninth annual Fourth World Assembly. "The Fourth World appears whenever small communities, nations or regions rise up to challenge overriding bigness," the organizers write. Four forums are planned (on "geo-economic" and "geo-cultural" changes, bioregions, and small communities), and speakers will include Caroline Estes (#60), Judith Plant (see ballot encl.) and Kirkpatrick Sale (#21). *FWA c/o Realistic Living, P.O. Box 140826, Dallas TX 75214*.

- If you don't want to endure that Texas

summer heat, you can still learn plenty at **Cry of the People, Cry of the Earth** (July 7-13, Washington, D.C.), the Center of Concern's summer institute. The Center is an independent religious "team" with a terrific reputation in the global development community; its institute is designed to "look at the best proposals arising in the development, peace and ecological communities, and see how they can be integrated for effective action." Panels, group discussions, "regular meetings of small continuity groups," "celebrations" and "liturgies" will all hopefully turn participants into "a community of learners and seekers." *Center of Concern, 1300 13th St. N.E., Washington DC 20017*.

- After Texas or D.C., you'll be ready for another largely experiential gathering, **The Earth and All Beings** (July 21-22, upstate New York). "All the faculty offer inspiring models of how to turn concern for the Earth into realistic action," says one flier, and it's right. Faculty range from John Seed, co-author of *Thinking Like a Mountain* (#51), to Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop (natural skin-care products); from Noel Brown of the U.N. Environment Program to Oren Lyons of the Onondaga Nation. *Omega Inst., Lake Drive, R.D. 2 - Box 377, Rhinebeck NY 12572*.

- From Rhinebeck it's just a hop, skip and jump to **Empowering the Individual & Developing Community** (July 26-29, Burlington, Vt.), the 28th annual conference of the Association for Humanistic Psychology. "We'll join together in communities and rejuvenate, empower ourselves and one another and grow," promise the organizers. Communities will include "change agents," "ecological," "technology" and "multicultural"; workshop leaders will include many people mentioned in *NEW OPTIONS*. *AHP, 1772 Vallejo St., #3, San Francisco CA 94123*.

### Healing the healers

- Hang out in New England. Then attend the fourth North American Bioregional Congress, **Uniting to Heal All Our Relations** (Aug. 19-26, Maine). "Bioregionalism values the local and regional," say the organizers. "We see the revitalization of places, people and local cultures as the only sure way of healing the planet." The Congress has two official themes, "Organizing Our Bioregions" and "Promoting Cultural Diversity," and if you read through the minutes of the steering committee meetings you can find two more. One is "transform[ing] bioregionalism into a visible movement," another is "giving people the experience of self-government." This the Congress will surely do, with its myriad of committees on "permaculture," "ecodefense," "ecofeminism," economics, "green cities," etc.

NABC c/o Gulf of Maine Books, 61 Maine St., Brunswick ME 04011.

• From the Bioregional Congress it's just a metaphysical hop, skip and jump to the third national Green gathering, **Greening the 90s: Expanding the Green Movement** (Sept. 12-16, Estes Park, Colo.). Its major purpose is to ratify the platform that was pulled together at the Eugene gathering (#60) and has been extensively revised by local Green groups. And it will present nuts-and-bolts workshops on "multi-cultural alliances," local organizing, and political action. Sounds like they're getting serious. *Green Clearinghouse, Box 30208, Kansas City MO 64112.*

• If you attend many (or even some) of the conferences above, you'll deserve to replenish yourself at **Spirit of Place 1990** (Sept. 18-23, Mesa Verde National Park, Colo.). This event — part symposium, part happening — will examine how the concept of sacred land is indispensable to "creating sustainable human communities." Just as important, the event will help us feel at home here, and at peace. Featured presenters will include anthropologists, ecologists, medicine men, architects, and pioneers in the field of "environmental psychology." *Inst. Study of Natural Systems, P.O. Box 637, Mill Valley CA 94942.*

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### Secrets of Washington

## Schneider: cancer was my teacher

In our Congressional scorecard for the 100th Congress (#57), only four Representatives scored a perfect 100. Perhaps the most intriguing is Claudine Schneider, a 43-year-old Republican from Rhode Island with a largely white ethnic constituency.

Schneider didn't just provide "back-door support" for the innovative measures on our scorecard. She was a principal sponsor of three of them, including the best global warming bill in Congress, written with the assistance of Amory Lovins. This year she'll be seeking to "move up" to the Senate by running against Claiborne Pell (ironically, one of our four best Senators).

Our new "Secrets of Washington" column will feature underappreciated political actors and underpublicized policy initiatives. We launch that column here by visiting Schneider in her bustling Congressional office (aides nearly bumping into each other; a gaggle of soldiers in uniform restlessly waiting to get in next) and asking her why she did so well on our scorecard. Was she the proverbial monkey-at-the-keyboard? Or did she have a consistent, visionary worldview?

"I have a very consistent . . . a very basic philosophy," she told us, her chief press officer watching her with an eagle eye. "It's based on individuals taking responsibility for their own future.

"I have a philosophy that relies on *prevention* first and foremost — as opposed to crisis management. And I think [that's] contrary to the status quo.

"Government and most individuals wait till crisis occurs. Then they . . . try to patch it up. I believe in prevention. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

"For example, in the area of [foreign] aid, we're giving aid to Ethiopia for the hungry. We are giving them fish — as opposed to giving them fishing *poles* and teaching them how to use those poles. I believe in preventing the starvation! [But I also] believe that people will be able to take care of themselves if we give them tools and train them. It's much more costly if we do it the other way, the way we've always done things."

People kept poking their heads into Schneider's office; you could hear the soldiers in the waiting room outside. But we wanted to know: How did Schneider come by her philosophy?

She settled back in her chair and said, "I think a lot of who I am came about at the age of 25 when I developed Hodgkin's disease — one of the few forms of cancer they refer to as 'curable.' At that time I started putting things in perspective, and . . . that had a lot to do with my preventive attitude. I was never going to get sick again! I was always going to be aware; I was always going to look at the big picture. And be tuned in to my environment, to my body, to what was going on around me. So I do that in policy decisions too."

We asked if many Congresspeople shared her worldview. She replied honestly: "On some subjects I'm able to — for example, on population [issues] I'm able to go after, you know, 23 or so people that I know that will be philosophically attuned with my point of view. Environmentally, there might be another number along those lines."

We looked at her quizzically. Twenty-three people is about four percent of Congress. "What else sustains me," she volunteered, "is that I think just as we've seen revolutions around the world, in Eastern Europe and South Africa and Central America, we're going to see a revolution in the U.S. And I hope that that revolution will reflect the voters finally waking up to the fact that if they don't like the way things are being done in the U.S. Congress, then they had better do it themselves, get more involved in the process, look more closely at their representatives. . . ."

The press officer stood up. It was time for the soldiers.

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## The Eye . . .

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The Eye watches people and groups that have appeared in NEW OPTIONS.

■ **"BEYOND EARTH DAY"**: We're not the only ones who were constructively-critical of Earth Day (#65). Ten days before the event, Worldwatch Institute's **Lester Brown** (#43) called a press conference. Before an SRO audience of reporters from major media outlets from around the world, he said we need to go "beyond Earth Day" in at least three respects: we need to address the global population problem, we need to achieve a "fundamental restructuring of the global economic system," and we need to confront, head-on, some "powerful vested interests" (he named two: CFC manufacturers and car manufacturers). Worldwatch's recently-released *State of the World 1990* gives teeth to Brown's bold rhetoric, with special chapters on ending global poverty and converting to a "peaceful" economy (\$10 from 1776 Mass. Ave. N.W., #701, DC 20036). . . .

■ **"BEYOND PROHIBITION"**: This winter, the **Drug Policy Foundation** held a conference in DC entitled "Beyond Prohibition: Practical Alternatives to the War on Drugs." Speakers included Joseph Galiber, Lester Grinspoon and Andrew Weil — all featured in our "Drugs Are Not the Enemy" article (#62). The Foundation likes to call itself "the leading force behind the loyal opposition" to the drug war; it's doing everything from lobbying to commissioning surveys to suing the government. Its *Drug Policy Letter* will keep you up on most of the issues we raised in our article (\$5/sample from 4801 Mass. Ave. N.W., DC 20016). . . .

■ **RELIGION AS A MOVEMENT**: If you share the conviction — with thinkers like Harry Boyte (#65) and Starhawk (#46) — that this country's religious life is every bit as crucial to its *political* future as are the peace, environmental and feminist movements, then you've got to get hold of Richard Cimino's monthly newsletter, **Religion Watch**. A favorite crib sheet for journalists, it tracks mainline *and* evangelical *and* spiritual developments in a style long on curiosity and short on biases. "I always try to find new things," Cimino told us, and the titles of his articles bear him out: "Black Church Reviving Through Self-Help Programs," "Profile of Gay Priests," "Fasting Holds Strong in U.S. Culture," "Liberation Theology — More Feminist Less Marxist" (\$1/sample from P.O. Box 652, N. Bellmore NY 11710). . . .

That's an Eye-ful!

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# The Ear . . .

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## Elusive pulse

I agree completely with your description of the 1980s as being better than we thought (#64). And I appreciate your calling attention to the emergence of the "caring individual," and your very helpful compendium of the "decade's greatest hits" in terms of new-values-going-mainstream.

But I think it's taking the argument too far to say that "The underlying message of the 80s was one of hope." It glosses over — as your article does, to some extent — the horrendous backslides we experienced in the area of social and environmental policy under the Reagan administration.

No amount of advance in the cultural laboratory during the 80s can compensate for the lost topsoil, poisoned atmosphere, increased poverty, etc. that issued from the misguided policies of those years.

— Alan AtKisson

*In Context Magazine*

*Bainbridge Island WA, Cascade Bior'n*

Congratulations on your #64. You've got your fingers on a pulse others are missing.

— Elise Boulding

*Boulder CO, Rocky Mountain Bioregion*

I liked your re-viewing of the 80s. But how could you ignore the greed; the wanton wasting of resources in the vast military buildup, for nothing; and the callousness toward anyone without money or down-on-their-luck or sick-without-means or trying to be a good mother without means? And all this rotten cake has been frosted with an icing of cynicism — about the poor, about the powerful, about hope, about the future, you name it.

— David Dodson Gray

*Wellesley MA, Lower New Engl. Bior'n*

I felt that your overview of the 80s was insightful and necessary, and worth every day of the two months you put into it.

It takes more courage sometimes to see what just might be going well than what's gone wrong, and it's precisely what we need to think about.

— Michael N. Nagler

*Tamales CA, Shasta Bioregion*

## Homophobia — or denial?

Your long article on the 80s omitted 25,000,000 people with a sweep of invisibility.

There were no references to the changed lives of gay and lesbian Americans.

— Burton Shapiro

*Brooklyn NY, Hudson Valley Bioregion*

An unusually rose-tinted essay, especially since I admire your writing most for its clear-eyed realism.

Certainly the vast accumulation of corporate, federal, state and consumer debt during the 80s didn't square with your assessment. Even more surprising was the fact that you could talk about the 80s and not mention AIDS.

Your silence on the AIDS holocaust does equal death, as only words and deeds can bring the gift of life to those suffering and those at risk. Does this oversight represent ignorance, homophobia, racism, egocentrism, or denial?

— Campion Read, M.D.

*New York NY, "Planet Bioregion"*

## "Personal growth"? Bah!

Much as I commend the spirit of your essay on the 80s, all you've really done is let us pat ourselves on the back for the Feel-Good Decade in which people did care — more about themselves than the community or planet.

Maybe we should examine the proposition that says self-development (caring about ourselves) really comes from the act of caring about others and society, and not through conscious "personal growth" efforts, which deflect action away from social change.

— Lorna Salzman

*New York Green Party*

*Brooklyn NY, "Lower Hudson Bioregion"*

Thanks for your article. In the midst of doom and gloom, it's reassuring to have some bright spots pointed out so clearly. However, you omitted one of the trends that seems to best illustrate your thesis — the proliferation of self-help groups.

AA is the biggest, oldest example, but the Adult Children of Alcoholics groups are what I think will make a big difference on this planet. Here are millions of men and women talking about their hurt and pain, feeling the terrible cost of the shame and confusion they experienced in childhood, and reaching out to heal themselves and each other.

Similar groups exist for those with other addictions, for survivors of child abuse and wife battering, and for all those helping each other through current crises — the death of a child, various illnesses, etc.

One of these days, it will be clear that almost everyone had or has damage that needs remediation. And when we take this serious-

ly, and act as if it matters, many of the ills we see around us will start shrinking.

— Joen Fagan, Ph.D.

*Atlanta GA, Piedmont Bioregion*

## All our relations

If caring implies relationship — and I agree that it does — then what about our relations with all our fellows (and not just fellow humans), with the rest of creation, and with the Earth who is parent to us all?

— Kenneth Edlund

*Delmar NY, "Hudson River Bioregion"*

An important part of the work that lies ahead has to do with developing an ability to clear away the barrage from the media of sensational garbage, negative and inevitably destructive, and focus on the Light. To this end I think your effort in #64 was brilliant. One thing, however, disturbed me and that was the mention of Procter & Gamble and 3M within the context of "excellent companies."

I realize that you were specifically referring to their management policies as reported in Peters and Waterman's book, but when I read that section I couldn't help but think of some of their other policies such as the continuation of worthless, costly, and cruel animal experimentation. Their claims that this testing is necessary for safety have been proven false; the resulting suffering is well-documented and staggering.

— Andrea Kessler

*New York NY, Hudson Valley Bioregion*

## How could you?

I confess that for six or seven years I'd been looking forward to getting on with the 90s, and was among those who loudly toasted when the 80s became history. Thanks for helping me see that it was not the washout I'd believed it to be.

But c'mon, enough Green-bashing for a while. "Weak" I can wholly agree with. "Inept" misses the mark. Either I'd like to see that word dropped or justified — how?, who?, the whole Green movement?

— Jim Richmond

*Green Committees of Correspondence*

*Kansas City MO, Great Plains Bioregion*

Thoughtful piece. But your picture of "Republicans" is filtered through a left wing media warp. Republicans continually extol the power of people working together in their own communities to solve problems, and decry big government control over a free society.

Also, what's so special about rock "music"? Not a word about country & western. [So

many] people who [think they empathize with] "the working class" really despise it.

— **State Sen. John McClaughry**  
*Concord VT, Highlands Bioregion*

Prince may "practice relentlessly honest self-disclosure," but the self disclosed is also relentlessly sexist.

— **Suzanne Sheber**  
*Boca Raton FL, "Everglades Bioregion"*

### Fad trip

Isn't it a tad premature to evaluate the 80s? You are doing the historian's task — attributing meaning to a period — without letting the period solidify properly first.

— **Vincent Stankiewicz**  
*Amherst MA, Pioneer Valley Bioregion*

I admire much of what NEW OPTIONS is trying to do. But when you go along with the New Decade passion to dissect the last 10 trips around the sun, you're on a fad trip.

— **Clif Bennett**  
*Hawkestone, Ont., Canada*

### Evangelicals? No way!

Sure, evangelicals proclaim that finding God is not easy. But I still get the impression the teaching implies that following the leader — who seems to be the evangelist and not Christ, in many cases — will get the "follower" many rewards in heaven.

— **Charlotte Neyland**  
*Great Bend KS, Great Plains Bioregion*

I agreed with many of your observations. But especially in the area of religion and the spirit the 1980s were a disappointment.

To many — including Ronald Reagan — religion barely rises above astrology and superstition, and God prefers Americans and the rich, whose wealth is a blessing. The director of the National Association of Evangelicals actually states that the U.S. is a "chosen" nation.

— **Roland James**  
*Phoenix AZ, Sonora Bioregion*

### Still the boob tube

I had one problem with #64 which is your portrayal of Ted Koppel's *Nightline*. Just look at the number of conservative establishment white guys on the show compared to the number of women, minorities, labor, feminists, activists, etc.

— **Vern Alper**  
*Northampton MA, Pioneer Valley Bioregion*

You praise ABC-TV's *thirtysomething* as a show about "normal" people who "take them-

selves seriously" and as one that raises "many of the important questions about life in the U.S." While I initially enjoyed the show, it has increasingly worn thin, representative of (and I'm sure you are somewhat defensive about this term) your typical 80s-turned-90s self-indulgent, self-conscious, self-centered, white yuppies who have insulated themselves from the real world.

Thus, Hope is a freelance writer (of course — God forbid she have a typical boring, tedious, meaningless, low-paying, bulls— job like the rest of us slobs) who dabbles in community volunteer work with a project attempting to prevent an incinerator being built in the area (your obligatory NIMBY story). Of course, she does not ever make the connection between her consumptive, acquisitive and wasteful lifestyle and the "need" for the incinerator, not to mention the economic fabric which encourages and benefits from that lifestyle.

Hope and Michael are expectedly liberal and politically "correct" on all issues just enough so as not to impinge upon their comfortable lifestyle or invade their safe haven against the chill winds blowing in the hard, cruel world. When Michael is out of work for just a short time, Hope's fears of losing that comfort and safety come to the fore, causing her to light a fire under her husband to go out and make a lot of money (I assume so they can keep up their payments on the BMW, VCR, microwave, CD player and whatever else these people "need" in order to survive).

There is absolutely no way that the networks or any of the mainstream media is going to permit a treatment of the real issues facing today's society. It just is not in their vested interest to do so.

— **Ron Landskroner**  
*Forest Hills NY, Hudson Valley Bioregion*

### Sendoff

I thought your article on the 80s was fascinating, and I'm with you! The usual assessments of the decade have been much too glib and narrow. A lot went on besides consumerism and Wall Street greed, and bravo to you for so thoughtfully broadening the perspective.

Sometimes I get a dismal feeling that all the magazines have one Group Mind or One Editor. You're an exception, and I'm a grateful reader.

— **Jane Jacobs**  
*Toronto, Ont., Canada*

I pray to the Goddess that NEW OPTIONS #164 (January, 2000) is as hopeful as #64.

— **Jess Shoup**  
*Berkeley CA, "Derby Creek Bioregion"*

### Advisors' corner

## From production to learning

By Willis Harman

There is no conversation more critical today than that around the question, Development for what? What is right development for a country?

It may have made sense in the past to think of economic production as the goal of society. But it does not make sense today.

One of our main "problems" today is our capacity to over-produce. And we know, now, that endless economic growth is unsustainable.

So the relevant question as we look ahead is not how we can stimulate more demand for goods and services. The relevant question is much more fundamental: What is the central purpose of advanced societies when it no longer makes sense for that central purpose to be economic production?

I believe that, based on what is going on in the world, the answer is apparent. The new central purpose is to advance *human* growth and development to the fullest extent, and to promote human learning in the broadest possible definition.

Development will be defined differently for different cultures and societies. However, human growth and learning will be central factors in all these definitions, with economic development demoted to the status of means rather than end.

One factor that will make human growth and learning more feasible as a social goal is the increasingly shared perception that the past ways of development were not good for the planet.

A second important factor is the growing sense of a crisis of meaning in the developed world. Just as individual riches are not always found to produce a happy life, so the allurements of affluent industrial society fail to provide the kind of shared meanings that make a society cohesive and inspire mutual loyalty.

Then too there is the growing sense in the "lesser developed" societies that modernization does not bring about the development that is best for them in human terms.

The evolutionary path suggested here will by no means be automatically achieved. But it can be achieved if enough of us see its promise and work toward it.

NEW OPTIONS Advisor Willis Harman is the author of *Global Mind Change* (#45) and other books.

## Clark, Milbrath: two Grand Syntheses

Dear Mary Clark and Lester Milbrath,

Fifteen years ago I set out to write what I thought would be the post-liberal, post-Marxist version of *Das Kapital*. It would summarize the emerging new worldview, values, analysis, goals and economics; it would go to bat for consciousness change, human-scale institutions, nonviolent social change strategies, and all the rest of it.

When it was finally published (as *New Age Politics*, 1979), I assumed it would be the first of many such books. But I was wrong. Thousands of books with a similar perspective were written, but few with the same urge to synthesize *everything*. (Denis Hayes recently confessed to the *Washington Post* that he was hoping to write "an ecological equivalent of *Das Kapital*" after the first Earth Day. But he got a job instead.)

So it was with a great deal of collegial excitement that I opened your enormous new books and discovered that — oh momma! — both of you are unabashedly trying to do just what I'd tried to do . . . and with 15 more years' worth of incredibly rich thinking and acting to draw upon. I doubt that any reader has *feasted* on your books quite so much as I have.

### Ways of thinking

Mary, I spent three years on *New Age Politics* and that felt like forever. You spent six years on *Ariadne's Thread: The Search for New Modes of Thinking* (St. Martin's Press, \$17 pbk) and I want to assure you it was worth every minute, at least to me. You've come up with a synthesis that's broader and deeper than anything I could have imagined back in 1975.

You teach biology at San Diego State University, and like any good scientist you begin at the beginning, which for you is the Earth itself, the ecosystem. Drawing seemingly effortlessly on virtually all the hard *and* social sciences, you demonstrate that there are, indeed, limits to growth, and that if we don't change our course ASAP we'll be done for. Then you look at the person and at culture. You show that many of our ancestors were "social, sharing and bonded"; you detail the astonishing variety of religions, worldviews and "cultural value systems" that have come and gone. Your point: There is not one "human nature"; we can be and do as we want.

Now you've laid the groundwork for your devastating critique of our "Western worldview," which you call "possessive individual-

ism," and which you claim is at the root of our institutional crisis. It's *because* we stress such values as efficiency, materialism and competition, you claim, that we have an economy based on economic growth rather than the steady-state; a political system that's centralized and unresponsive rather than decentralized and democratic; a defense system that's based on nuclear hardware rather than conflict resolution mechanisms and "nonviolent defense"; and so on.

How can we get beyond all this? First and foremost, you claim, our *ways of thinking* are going to have to change — in three key areas. We're going to have to become more ecologically aware, more passionate about life, and more tolerant.

### Social learning

Lester, I knew you directed the Program in Environment and Society at SUNY-Buffalo, and it was apparent at conferences that you were working on a Big book. But I had no idea *Envisioning a Sustainable Society: Learning Our Way Out* (State Univ. of New York Press, \$19 pbk) would be as comprehensive as it is. When you say you'd been "preparing for the last 30 years" to write it, I believe you.

Like Clark's book, yours begins with a critique of growth; you go so far as to assert that the #1 value of any society must be "maintaining the integrity and good functioning of its ecosystem." Then you develop — at much length and with tremendous sophistication — a critique of the worldview that's responsible for our grow-or-die economy. You expose our "dominator/submissive relationships." You examine our competing "belief paradigms" ("Dominant Social" vs. "New Environmental") and, drawing on original survey research, demonstrate that the latter is ascendant. You discuss the phenomenon of "social learning" and argue — convincingly — that it's the essence of what we have to do now.

Once the importance of consciousness, of new thinking, of *glasnost*, has been impressed upon us, you move into the second half of your book, on restructuring, or *perestroika*. You have fine chapters synthesizing many people's ideas on sustainable agriculture, fulfilling work, "life without materialism," socially controlled technology, etc.; but your passion comes to the fore in the chapter on government reform. You'd have the national government set up a "Council for Long-Range Societal Guidance" that would automatically review all major policy initiatives before they

could be put into effect . . . paying particular attention to their possible long-run impact on society, values and the environment. You think it could be a veritable fourth "check and balance" on government, assuming politicians or citizens chose to take it seriously. Even more important, you think it could trigger some of the "social learning" we need.

### Two of a kind

There are some significant differences between your books. Above all, Mary, your book comes across as much more uncompromising. For example, Milbrath is intrigued by the notion of bioregionalism but fears it's already "too late" for that. You unblushingly urge the creation of "self-sufficient regions, even self-reliant cities."

But after finishing your books I couldn't get over how *similar* they are.

I don't just mean that they are both Grand Syntheses; their very *structures* are similar. There is, first, the conviction that every society *must* fit in to the ecology; then, the assertion that our centuries-old worldview (and not human nature or even capitalism *per se*) is at the root of our institutional problems; then the assertion that any genuine solution must consist of, first, changing our beliefs and values, and second, getting a grip on our science and technology.

Just as we can say that the archetypal Marxist book traces the cultural superstructure back to its economic base, so I suppose we can now say that the archetypal Greenish book traces the economic superstructure back to a cultural ("worldview") base.

Even your books' flaws are similar. Both are 100 pages too long. Both suffer in their second — institutional — halves from too high a level of abstraction. I wanted less on why we "should" be cooperative, loving, etc., and more on how our tax or drug policies might reflect those fine values. The credibility of our perspective rests on our ability to take those values out of the realm of pillow talk and into the arena of public policy.

If the "Western worldview" is too aggressive, your alternative worldviews sometimes seem too passive; I don't want to be obsessed with "fitting in" and Being Nice.

And your strategies! Marx would have blushed, and rightly so. Both of you come out firmly in favor of evolutionary and nonviolent cultural change. Well, stop the presses! But if your books prove anything, it's that we've got to speed up change. And Mary, your passionate moralizing, and Lester, your Societal Guidance Council, just don't seem sufficient.

I'd have given anything for books like yours 15 years ago; I wouldn't have had to write my own. I suspect many of your readers will feel almost as appreciative.

Continued from page two:

dividuals. They simply collect money from someone — their shareholders, customers or employees — and transfer it to government.

"This immediately raises the issue of who ultimately pays the corporate income tax. Depending on the exact assumptions used it could be a tax on shareholders, a sales tax on consumers, or a tax on employees. Personally, I believe it is a . . . sales tax in the long run.

"While there may be a certain perverse political virtue in collecting a tax where no one is sure whether he pays it, simple economic efficiency and equity would seem to call for the elimination of taxes where incidence is uncertain."

Thurow would have corporations send each stockholder the equivalent of a W-2 form at the end of each year, telling them how much income they'd earned and how much tax had been withheld on it.

Daly — more concerned about social responsibility than economic growth per se — would handle things differently. He would have corporate profits be actually distributed to each stockholder at the end of each year. His rationale: This would shift corporations "away from internal financing of new investment [and into] competition in the capital market for investment funds. This is a more arms-length transaction in which harder questions are likely to be asked about the . . . proposed expansion."

## Social insecurity

The public hardly realizes it, but social security taxes are now responsible for 37% of federal revenues — nearly as much as personal income taxes (44%). In 1970, by contrast, social security brought in only 23% of our revenues.

Social security is even more regressive than a sales tax. Not only does *everyone* have to pay the 7.65% tax on even the first *dollar* of their salaries; the tax disappears on every dollar you make over \$51,300!

And everyone knows there's trouble ahead. As Nat Mills wrote in *In These Times* (April 18), "Social security deductions are not [set aside] for future benefits to the payrollee, nor are they accruing earnings as is expected for any normally retained wealth. Instead, it all drops into the general tax-revenue pot today."

Daly and Cobb advocate a negative income tax, which they'd substitute for social security benefit payments, aid to dependent children, public housing, and much else besides. In their scheme, if you made nothing the government would pay you \$9,000 a year; if you made \$8,000 the government would still pay you \$5,000 (a "positive incentive to work,"

they say); if you made \$12,000 you'd still get \$3,000; and so on up to \$18,000.

We think a guaranteed income for everyone is an idea whose time has come and gone. It's a product of the old stress on entitlements, not of the emerging new stress on community. However, we think negative income tax payments can and should replace payments to all *social security* recipients, now and in the future.

As Daly and Cobb remark, "There is an inherent confusion in the [social security] program between its welfare aspects and its role as a retirement plan." In the spirit of community, the negative income tax — along with the national *holistic* health care plan we advocated in NEW OPTIONS #36 (a plan that would cost us *less* than medical care today) — would ensure that social security recipients could meet their basic needs. Anything more would be up to them.

## Second source

The personal income tax won't have to take up *all* the slack from the corporate and social security taxes. Currently the government derives 1% of its revenues from the estate tax (a tax on all possessions left after death) and 3% of its revenues from the excise tax (all taxes on the production, sale or consumption of commodities). Daly and Cobb, Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute (#43), Patricia Taylor of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (#57), and many other innovative thinkers, have proposed increasing some of these taxes dramatically — partly to raise revenues, but partly also to introduce more social responsibility into the workings of the American economy.

We believe that \$200 billion — over 20% of the government's current revenues — could and *should* be raised through these taxes:

- Lindsey advocates *sumptuary taxes* on

"luxury cars, boats, household servants, second homes, and the like."

- In issue #48, we discuss concrete plans for increasing the *inheritance tax*, the *alcohol tax*, the *tobacco tax* and the *gasoline tax*; as well as plans for introducing a *stock exchange tax* and a *corporate merger tax*.

- In issue #62 we make the case for legalization of drugs, and for a stiff *tax on drugs*.

- Daly and Cobb advocate a substantial *severance tax*, i.e. a tax on the use of all our renewable and nonrenewable resources: "The incentive will be toward more resource-saving, labor-using patterns of production and consumption."

- In addition Daly and Cobb advocate a *pollution tax*: "[It will] promote equity in that consumers will then pay the real costs of what they buy rather than passing much of it to society at large."

## Zeitgeist not enough

Beyond left and right — beyond levelling and "looking out for #1" — is community: respecting and even encouraging human diversity while, at the same time, making sure that everybody's basic needs are met.

The simple flat tax with a generous personal exemption is a primary example of a proposal that responds not to the raucous drummings of the left and right, but to the contemporary longing for personal *and* social responsibility, autonomy *and* commitment. In a word, community.

But it is not enough to be at the forefront of the zeitgeist. A political proposal — unlike a cultural trend — needs to be propagated by an organized movement. And we do not yet have a political movement with the breadth, savvy and self-confidence to go "beyond left and right."

But we will. And it will make the flat tax a topic of passionate national debate.

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