

An Incomplete Ecology

Environmental Concerns Need Grounding in Sovereignty and Culture

BOOK REVIEW BY MARK WEGIERSKI

The British-born Ronald Wright is a historian, novelist, and author of archeological and travel-based books. His historical work about the conquest of the Americas by Europeans, *Stolen Continents*, was widely acclaimed. He has also written a novel, *A Scientific Romance*, which was also praised. Wright currently lives in British Columbia, Canada's westernmost province (which lies on the Pacific) known for its northern rainforest and as a major center of the worldwide ecological movement.

The main thoughts contained in this book were initially presented in November 2004, in the form of the prestigious Massey Lecture. The lectures are named after Vincent Massey, who was the first Canadian-born Governor-General. The Governor-General is the Monarch's representative in the Canadian system of parliamentary democracy. Until Vincent Massey, the Governor-Generals had traditionally been members of the British aristocracy. This was at a time when many Canadians considered themselves "British North Americans." Ironically, Canadians will now have another Governor-General from abroad—Michaëlle Jean—a highly successful Haitian immigrant, who, like the previous Governor-General, Adrienne Clarkson, is a prominent CBC personality. The Massey Lectures have taken place since 1961 at the University of Toronto, under the aegis of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which usually broadcasts the event live.

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The book is part of a fairly popular category of writing today, where authors endeavor to summarize virtually the whole meaning of human history, and their own singular conception of what the future of humanity will consist of, within the pages of their book.

Ronald Wright's central idea can be seen as bringing attention to the questionable nature of the concept of "human progress." Wright argues that the process of human "advancement" in history is far more ambiguous than might have been thought in the optimistic nineteenth century. Looking at the decline and fall of such major empires as Rome, or smaller centers of culture

such as that on Easter Island (Rapa Nui), Wright argues that the ecological substructure of a given society—which is indeed an incredibly important aspect of any given society—should never be taken for granted. In surveying the process of decline of various societies—which he mainly attributes to the disintegration of their ecological base—Wright is undertaking a similar endeavor as that which Jared Diamond undertook in his book, *Collapse*—which appeared a short time after Wright's.

Although putting the concept of "progress" in question might seem like a traditionalist stance, almost everything in Wright's book leans to the left. Indeed, his book could be interpreted as praise for a kind of primitivism—and especially for aboriginal cultures in the Americas. In Wright's conception, Europeans are virtually monsters, whose main objectives have been the conquest of other, more pacific peoples, and the destruction of the environment. Indeed, Wright could be seen as a rather typical, self-hating WASP intellectual—of which there are so many today. In his attacks on "progress" Wright may have found a hook on which

A Short History of Progress

by Ronald Wright

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to hang his attempt to discredit virtually all the achievements and heritage of Western civilization.

One of Wright's reasons for indicting "progress" is that it leads to "hierarchical" societies. The prehistorical state, according to Wright, is one of equality. Hence, the development of civilization, which brings about numerous stratifications in society, undermines equality. However, in his criticism of ancient, medieval, and early-modern societies, Wright has virtually no comprehension of how something like religion and the sacred, or a sense of divine kingship, might serve deep-seated human needs. He lacks a sense of how the sacred and public art and architecture of earlier societies would have been higher priorities to those societies than the provision of material needs for the common populace. There is something in the art and architecture of earlier periods that is in itself magnificent, although it is now said by the left to have been built on human misery. It is a crude materialist reductionism that would have called for the building of ten thousand huts for the commonfolk instead of, say, the Taj Mahal. In earlier times, the human psyche seemed to wish to reach for the high and the sublime. Today, with physical resources probably millions of times more than those available earlier to high cultures, we seem to have lost our capacity to create great art. Are we now to celebrate the achievements of American pop-culture, with its "rap, crack, et Big Mac" (as a French critic of America put it), or the relentless antinomianism of current-day, so-called high art.

To get some sense of where society is going, we should look at what kinds of human personalities are dominant in it. Earlier societies were dominated by priestly and aristocratic castes. Today we are ruled by a combination of antinomian verbalist elites, technocrats, and politicians who are either creatures of resentment or bland non-entities—a system described as "the managerial-therapeutic regime" by some of its American and European critics.

Because of his crude materialist reductionism, Wright is dismissive of the importance of the role of

religion and sacred and public art in earlier societies. He also tries to establish a line of continuity between the earlier high cultures and contemporary Western societies—similarly "hierarchical"—hence oligarchic and oppressive, yet he neglects all the effusions of left-wing ideology in today's Western societies.

While giving such major attention to the conquest of the Americas by the Europeans, Wright seems to forget that it is possible that there may be

other cases where societies decline and fall not only as a result of ecological factors—they are simply overrun by other population groups. One could ask if the West today is not threatened by the emerging superpowers of China and India, as well as by the demographic tide from various Third World countries?

One could of course agree with Wright's criticism of the current-day consumerist society in "advanced" countries—characterized by that reckless consumption of natural resources. Of course, one would like to see a greater

(true) rationality in the consumption of goods, some kind of limits on this orgy of excess. But it could be pointedly asked if the so-called "welfare state" seen in many Western societies, which, it might be argued, often offers irresponsible people economic goods without requiring some kind of minimal standards of behavior from them, is actually the best solution for the conservation of natural resources?

It could be surmised that Wright wants to link the ecological program to a left-wing agenda (for example, having left-liberal parties governing Western societies, or having the entire world under the supervision of the United Nations). The ecological question is an enormously important and symptomatic factor in the decline of societies, but not the only one. In regard to the current-day situation of Western civilization, Wright seems to ignore such questions as moral decay, cultural exhaustion, the lack of social and individual discipline, or the issue of conquest from outside. ■

