

At Least Someone Is Watching Our World

An interview with Lester Brown

by John F. Rohe

The *Social Contract* asked John Rohe to interview Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute as an introduction to a sampling of his writings in this quarter's feature section.

JOHN ROHE: Today is July 18, 2002. My name is John Rohe and on the phone with me is Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute. Good afternoon, Mr. Brown.

LESTER BROWN: Hi John.

JFR: The readership of The Social Contract will know of you. History precedes you here. Let's discuss the things that aren't always reported: your personal history, how you came to the Earth Policy Institute, and why. But first, where you were born?

LB: In Bridgeton, New Jersey. This is way down at the southern end of the state, where the Delaware River turns east and becomes Delaware Bay.

JFR: What year?

LB: 1934. The same year as Bridget Bardot!

JFR: Hopefully, she reminds all her friends of that fact. Did you have any siblings?

LB: Yes, a brother three years younger, and a sister who is twelve years younger.

JFR: Did you basically stay in Bridgeton, New Jersey during your early years?

LB: Yes. It was actually a rural community and Bridgeton was the town with the county seat. I was born in a farming community, and lived there until I left for Washington. Initially my father was a hired hand on a large farm and he rented a farm for a few years. We sharecropped for a few years, and then by

the time I was nine years old, he bought a small farm. This was in 1943. It became the family farm. That's where we lived. My niece and her husband now live in the farmhouse.

JFR: How many acres were there?

LB: Forty acres, and we used to rent some additional land too. We had cattle, usually between a dozen and twenty cows, some pigs and chickens, and field crops as well as some cash crops of tomatoes, peppers, and asparagus for local processing.

JFR: Did you have a little roadside stand too?

LB: No we did not.

JFR: Were you working on the farm alongside your father and mother?

LB: Working there, but in our early teens, my brother and I started our own farming operation of growing tomatoes. We bought an old tractor for a couple hundred dollars, overhauled it, got it running, and rented a couple of fields. We gradually expanded. That started around 1948. And then, by 1958, we were producing and marketing a million-and-a-half pounds of tomatoes per year.

JFR: You and your brother?

LB: Yes. We hired a lot of people to pick the tomatoes. Of course, it took a good-sized crew to do all that. I graduated from Rutgers in 1955 with a major in agricultural science. In 1956, I spent the last half of the year living in villages in India under a program run by the National 4-H Foundation, called the International Farm Youth Exchange Program. It was an exchange program set up after World War II where young farmers from the U.S. lived with farm families in about forty countries around the world and young farmers from those countries came to the U.S. I was one of ten young farmers who went to India in 1956.

JFR: In many of your writings you cover the relationship that we as humans must have with our

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surroundings on this finite planet. I wonder if there were any early experiences, before we leave your childhood, that planted the notion of sustainability in your mind?

LB: There probably were a couple of things. One was growing up in a farming environment. I understood the relationship between us and the natural systems on which we depend. And also another thing that influenced me a great deal, I think, is that living on a farm we tended to be by ourselves quite a bit. I did a lot of reading whenever I had the time.

JFR: Were you influenced by the literature?

LB: We had to do the milking every morning and night, and the other chores, but whenever I had a chance, I read. I read a lot of biographies. There was a series of biographies written at the grade-school level about Kit Carson, George Washington, Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, and Benjamin Franklin. I think I was very much influenced by that, and drawn to the issues. For Washington and that generation, the great issue was independence. For Lincoln, it was the slavery issue. For me, it became the sustainability issue. I think that this is the challenge of our generation.

JFR: Did you eventually leave the farm?

LB: We left for India in August, 1956, by ship. My brother took care of the tomato harvest that year. The tomatoes were just starting to ripen as I was leaving. I farmed for two years then left for Washington.

JFR: Your readings of the biographies of Washington and Lincoln did not, as such, bring you face-to-face with notions of sustainability, but rather they brought you in contact with people blazing a new trail. They were on the frontiers of a new issue, and you could see how they were trying to carry the ball over the goal line for those issues. I assume you drew inspiration from them in that manner, as distinguished from gleaning specific insight on sustainability.

LB: Right. They were attracted to the great issues of their time, and I think that initially, at the subconscious level, I also was beginning to look at the great issues – living in Indian villages and getting a sense of what population pressure is about, even in 1956, when there were only 450 million people living there, as I recall. It began to suggest to me that the food, population, and sustainability issues were going to be the issues for our generation.

JFR: Did you have a sense of that before going to India, or was the trail in India a road to Damascus conversion?

LB: I'd gone to Rutgers and majored in general agricultural science. I could select whatever courses in science that I wanted that would be feasible to someone who wanted to grow tomatoes for the rest of his life. When I went to India, and after I came back, I still planned to grow tomatoes. It was not until a couple years later that I began to realize that just growing tomatoes was not going to be all that satisfying.

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JFR: When you say a couple years later, you're talking about even after returning home from India?

LB: That's right. While in India, I did not realize that this was really affecting me. But, in fact, it was. It took a couple of years before I began to realize that I really wanted to work on world food issues.

JFR: What were some of the other causative events in your life, after India, that led you down this path?

LB: Well, I think the main thing was realizing that in growing tomatoes, we had, in a sense, done that. We could have grown more, but we were probably in the upper one-percent in size of operation on the East Coast already. It just didn't seem that challenging anymore. Having been in India and lived in villages with Indian families began to suggest itself as a big challenge for the future. Based on that, I wanted to join the Foreign Agricultural Service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington. But to do that, I needed a degree in agricultural economics. So I wintered over in College Park for just two semesters and did everything including the dissertation so I could join the Foreign Agricultural Service, which I did on June 1, 1959. That's when Eisenhower was in the White House and Ezra Taft Benson from Utah was the Secretary of Agriculture. My early time there

was spent working on the rice bowl countries in Asia.

JFR: Did you return to College Park?

LB: I stopped over at the University of Maryland sort of en route to Washington.

JFR: So once you graduated from Rutgers, and you were basically done there, then you went to College Park?

LB: Yes.

JFR: And then did you continue with your education?

LB: After I had been in the department for a couple of years, 1959 to 1961, I went to Harvard to get a masters degree in public administration.

JFR: And when did you graduate from Harvard?

LB: 1962.

JFR: After graduating from Harvard, you are still twelve years away from founding the WorldWatch Institute.

LB: Right.

JFR: What took place in the interval?

LB: After returning from Harvard, I began expanding beyond the Asian countries and working on world situations. I did the first systematic set of projections of population, land, food, and resources to the end of the century.

JFR: And who did you do this for?

LB: I did that at the Economic Research Service in the Department of Agriculture. After the reorganization between Eisenhower and Kennedy, my group was moved from the Foreign Agriculture Service to the Economic Research Service, but it was still basically the same thing, just in a slightly different structural setting. So I did the book *Man, Land and Food*, looking ahead at world food needs. It was published in November of 1963.

JFR: Was that a publication of the Department of Agriculture?

LB: Yes. And the report made a big splash because it was a pioneering effort at the time. We were just getting to take some longer-term looks at the future as we had come out of the early post-war period. Then in the beginning of January 1964, *U.S. News & World Report* did a cover story on the report. It was a four-page summary of the report. It picked up all the highlights in graphic format. That launched food as a global issue and, in a sense, me as well.

JFR: This must have afforded a great deal of credibility for you and your causes. Your research presumably put you in close contact with the necessary sources of data and statistics.

LB: Right.

JFR: I gather than no small part of your career involves just that; finding the numbers, stalking the statistics, and having them make sense for people who otherwise wouldn't know where to look.

LB: I think it was Sir Francis Bacon who said a scientist is someone who looks at a set of numbers until patterns begin to appear. And that is sort of what I was doing. My goal, once I was in the Foreign Agriculture Service, even when I was working initially with the rice bowl countries in Asia, was to understand world agriculture. I just worked day and night every day to study it. Then when the opportunity came to do this study in 1963, I was ready. Shortly after that, I became special assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, and he found me helpful because he had to make decisions on everything from commodity prices, to trade policy, to food aid development assistance. Many people held pieces of valuable information. If you wanted to do something on cotton, there were cotton specialists. If you wanted to do something on different trade policies, there were trade specialists, there were nutrition people, but there were very few people who could look at the big picture and see the issue in a broader perspective. That is what my specialty became – the big-picture analysis. This helped the Secretary to understand the options he was facing and the consequences of the various policy choices.

JFR: Were the sources of your information readily available or did you really have to roll up your sleeves and arrange for data to be gathered?

LB: I did a lot of things. For example, I was asked to go to India in the fall of 1965 to review the agricultural part of the next five-year plan. While there, I began to sense that India was experiencing a monsoon failure. This experience is actually described in *Full House*, the book I did five or six years ago.

JFR: That was a great book.

LB: There is a Foreword in that of about four or five pages describing that experience. The bottom line was that India was having a monsoon failure and was

facing massive famine. I worked on the effort to get wheat shipped. We eventually shipped a fifth of our wheat crop to India that following year to avert famine. And then they had a second monsoon failure the next year. So for two years in a row, we shipped a huge amount of wheat, about two shiploads leaving every day for India. It was the largest shipment of food between two countries in world history.

JFR: How did you do it?

LB: Conventional wisdom suggested you couldn't get more than four million tons through India's ports. We did some interesting things. I was not responsible for this, but we had some guys in the Department who had been in the Quartermaster Corps, the logistics

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arm of the army in World War II. They helped figure out that we could lease from Esso, now Exxon, the largest tanker that was then afloat. It was called *The Manhattan*. We anchored it in the Bay of Bengal, and we leased it for several months. On one side, the incoming ships would unload. It would become a huge grain storage facility. On the other side, we had the small boats, called dhows, that would go up the Ganges and the tributaries that were very small. We had hundreds of them being loaded all at the same time. We moved ten million tons into India that year. It was quite an interesting experience. We also used that experience to force India to undertake a number of key economic reforms. For example, they had an agricultural price policy, which consisted of food ceiling prices in the cities. We wanted to convert that into support prices to encourage farmers to invest in agriculture. So, there was a whole series of reforms that were instituted in response to the food aid from the United States.

JFR: Now we're inching our way toward 1974. Can you report on other events that led up to the foundation of the WorldWatch Institute?

LB: Late in 1968, Nixon was elected president. By that time I had become the administrator of the newly established International Agriculture Development Service. This was something President Kennedy had worked on with Secretary Freeman to establish an agency that would take advantage of the vast technical resources of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, from foresters, to cooperatives, to research, to soil conservation. I was heading that agency from 1966 onward. We were subcontracting the agricultural program in about forty countries. I gained a lot of experience from that. The day before Nixon took office in 1969, I resigned because I was politically expendable and would have been expended. I didn't have any desire to work with Nixon either. I helped Jim Grant, the late head of UNICEF, to start the Overseas Development Council. I was there for five years, and I began to see the need for a research institute to work exclusively on global environmental problems.

JFR: That obviously led to your forming the WorldWatch Institute in 1974?

LB: Right. The Rockefeller brothers gave me a half-million dollars to start the WorldWatch Institute.

JFR: That was the catalyst, the \$500,000.

LB: Yes.

JFR: I know you're still active with it. What is its annual budget now?

LB: The budget is over four million dollars a year with a staff of about thirty or so. I moved from being president to chairman of the board, and then, in January, I stepped down as chairman. I'm still on the board, but most of my energies are now devoted to things we're doing here at Earth Policy Institute.

JFR: Did the move from president to chair start your shift from WorldWatch Institute to Earth Policy Institute?

LB: Right.

JFR: Tell me about that transition. What caused you to form the Earth Policy Institute?

LB: Well, after I became chairman of the board of WorldWatch I had, for the first time in decades, more time to think, because I didn't have to manage it. I

didn't have to do all the fund-raising, as well as full-time research and writing. With more time to think, there were some things that I obviously wanted to do. I wanted to write a book that would sketch out a vision of what an environmentally sustainable economy would look like.

JFR: Is that your book entitled Eco-Economy?

LB: Right. And that's because within the environmental movement, from Rachel Carson forward, we [in the environmental movement] have been against things. It is not always clear what we're for. It seemed to me that we needed a positive image to rally around and to share. If we don't have a shared sense of where we want to go, we're probably not going to get there.

JFR: Or, as it is otherwise said, if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.

LB: Right.

JFR: So, Eco-Economy becomes the mission statement for EPI?

LB: Yes. That is what Earth Policy is all about.

JFR: Was it difficult for WorldWatch to move in that direction, or do you see WorldWatch remaining an organization with its finger on the pulse of statistics?

LB: I think more the latter. Not everyone could do research also. A good visionary, if you will. I think one of the things that identifies me is a sense of where we want to go and how to get there. It is kind of a big picture set of issues you're dealing with. Not everyone is comfortable doing that.

JFR: That's how many non-profits seem to operate. Eventually they find a fork in the road. Some people shift over, and others are comfortable staying where they are. I can see a strong cooperative relationship between the two organizations that you founded, and will forever be associated with your name. Are there other organizations that you were active in founding?

LB: Yes. I helped Jim Grant start the Overseas Development Council, but I was not really the founder. I was just in an assisting role there. And then WorldWatch and Earth Policy Institute are the two that I've done on my own.

JFR: There are such formidable forces out there. I know you and I have spoken at conferences on this. It is everywhere. You can't open up the business report of a newspaper or magazine without

confronting the basic assumption that growth is good, more growth is better, and the belief that a finite planet can somehow accommodate perpetual growth. Where do you see the massive infrastructure of growth taking us?

LB: It seems to me that the key is probably not taking on the growth issue directly and saying you can't keep growing, but rather to talk about what kind of growth we need and where. We need enormous growth in wind energy and solar cell manufacturing. We need to expand the food production in developing countries. We need to invest heavily in a whole new industry of water efficiency as we have with energy efficiency for the last couple of decades now. So I talk about the growth opportunities and the kind of growth. If we begin to do that, some of the other issues will take care of themselves.

JFR: So, it is still growth. It is just channeling that growth in a more sensible manner.

LB: It may or may not be. We don't have to determine that.

JFR: Les, I hope that you and I will be able to bump into each other again along the way. It is just a great privilege to have this opportunity to speak with you.

LB: Thanks John.

JFR: Thank you, sir.