

Fostering Hope in Calamitous Times: A Review Essay on Randall Amster's *Peace Ecology* (2015)

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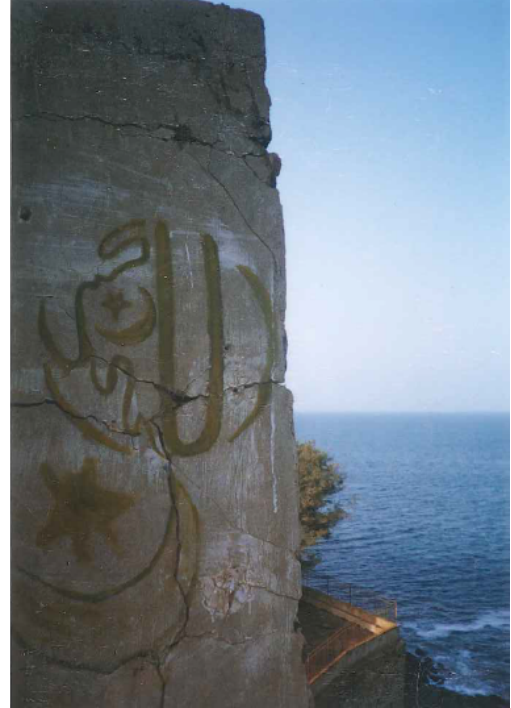
Abstract: This essay examines Randall Amster's book *Peace Ecology* as a critical intervention articulating vital connections among discourses from peace and justice studies (on one hand) and the most vexing problems addressed by sustainability studies (on the other): from violent conflict and social inequity to environmental injustice and global ecocide. Reading this dialogue through the lens of *hope*, the author argues that Amster's synthesis of this research provides effective tools for helping educators, students and practitioners of sustainability to generate new thought – and direct action – around these issues. By cataloguing and analyzing the many successes of ecological peacebuilding without absolving the paradigms of thought that continue to propagate war against people and planet, Amster empowers us to avoid both the trap of despair and the delusion of complacent optimism in order to foster the conditions that promote human beings' mutually-beneficial peace and coexistence with each other and with the Earth.

Keywords: peace ecology, peace and justice studies, sustainability studies, hope, agency

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The Earth has enough for the needs of all, but not for the greed of a few.
—Mahatma Gandhi



Façade of tower overlooking former slave market on Île de Gorée (Senegal), now preserved by UNESCO as a “memory island” for intercultural dialogue and reconciliation. Graffiti spells Allahu Akbar. Photo by Adrian Fielder (2000)

Hope, as this issue of *JSE* reminds us, grows or withers by how we interpret our experience, how we frame our relationship to each other and to the world we share, and thus also how we envision and articulate our story in this unique moment of human history. If we are to intervene successfully in the multiple escalating crises of the Anthropocene, we must examine them with clarity and honesty, and with the courage to bear full witness to even the most tragic episodes of human behavior. As an example of such courage, in his recently-published encyclical *Laudato Si'* [*On Care for Our Common Home*], Pope Francis explains that his intention in thoroughly cataloguing the catastrophic symptoms of our current socioecological crisis is to help us all “to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (Francis 2015, para. 19). In cultivating that painful awareness, if we are to avoid the paralysis of despair, inaction or denial, we must nevertheless see the possibility for reconciliation of such wrongs, for what some scholars of the Shoah (Goldenberg & Millen 2007; Fogelman 1998) call *tikkun olam* or “mending the world”: that is, not as a Panglossian delusion of wishful optimism, but as a rough-hewn conviction, based on sound evidence, that our choices can in fact positively impact the arc of history. How do we reconcile the urgent need for cogent analysis and direct action with the potential for unwittingly disempowering ourselves through candid reflection on such calamities?

As educators, how can we help our students and our wider communities negotiate this proverbial minefield, cultivating clear-eyed hope in ways that serve us all positively?

It is in this intellectual context that *Peace Ecology*, a new book by Randall Amster, JD, PhD (Director of the Program on Justice and Peace at Georgetown University) is a game-changing intervention. Synthesizing best practices and principles from both ecology and peace studies – including interconnectedness, relational thinking, mutualism, reciprocity and the fostering of diversity and regeneration – peace ecology hinges on the premise that “as a larger-than-human set of relationships and factors, ‘the environment’ is capable of transcending our differences and, in our mutual reliance upon it for survival, tends to foster a sense of common humanity” (Amster 2015, 9). Leveraging the potential of the Earth to function “as a healing medium that can serve to mediate human conflicts and provide a shared mode of exchange among relative equals” (9), peace ecology strives to “turn theory into practice, crisis into opportunity, and, ultimately, war into peace” (23). If that sounds idealistic, then you may be surprised by just how pragmatic and successful these concepts are in practice. For, in contrast to the lack of evidence that war actually works in sustaining human society, there is a rich body of literature, reviewed compellingly in this book, on the effectiveness of peace ecology for durably resolving conflict and for equitably structuring our interdependence with each other and with the socioecological systems in which we are nested.

As a sustainability educator, you have probably heard more than one claim along the lines that “competition and aggression are so fundamental to human nature that we can never achieve peace.” In response to such pessimism, *Peace Ecology* provides us with a deeply heartening catalogue of counter-examples as evidence that we can indeed “Save the Humans” (Amster 2015, 40) by deploying our “radical empathy” as a “tool for positive social and ecological change” (106). In chapter three, we see that people all over the world are developing autonomous systems for producing and sharing essential resources (food, water and energy) outside of the “dominant web” of globalized corporate control and “enforced dependency” (Evans 2012), including “a vibrant global movement to democratize the production of food” (Amster 2015, 79). In chapter four, we learn of the (re)emergence of a “free economy” (93) articulated through multiplying examples of altruistic and mutualistic exchange such as Warm Showers, the Karma Kitchen, Food Not Bombs and many more. In chapter five we read about how communities demonstrate resilience during disasters by coming together in solidarity in times of crisis (Solnit 2009) despite the insidious efforts of disaster profiteers (Klein 2007). In chapters six and seven we learn about the robust research that exists on “environmental peacemaking” (Conca and Dabelko 2002), through which a conflict can be transformed into an opportunity for peace when the concerned parties come to see that “there is more to be gained by cooperating than by competing” (Amster 2015, 144), including “peace parks” and other examples of international cooperation to manage transboundary environmental resources (Ali 2007).

Because such successes require sustained effort using our most sophisticated faculties, our awareness of them should not delude us into the complacency of thinking, like *Candide*, that we already live in the “best of all possible worlds.” In contrast to the cynical notion that we cannot achieve peace, you may have also encountered optimistic positions proclaiming “violence vanquished,” such as Steven Pinker’s highly influential thesis that modernity created the conditions for utterly ending violence (Pinker 2011a; Pinker 2011b). If, like this reader, you have

not been able to reconcile your hope for such a positive outlook with your awareness of ubiquitous violence inflicted upon people and planet, you and your students will find fresh and empowering insights to respond to such positions in Dr. Amster's review of the intellectual legacy of Hobbes and Malthus (chapter one). Hobbes maintained that humans are so predisposed to violent aggression that we need to be subsumed within a social order overseen by a centralized state apparatus (a "Leviathan"), complete with threat of reprisal by force, in order to curb our warlike tendencies and save us from ourselves (Hobbes 1651). More than a century later, Malthus posited that the human population would soon outstrip the ability of farmland to provide food for everyone, and that we would then suffer a massive die-off (a "Malthusian catastrophe") by exceeding what we now call the carrying capacity of the earth. In stark contrast to the abundance Vandana Shiva reminds us we will see by "making peace with the Earth" (Shiva 2013), Malthus maintained, "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man [sic]" (Malthus 1798; 4). This doomsday prediction animated politicians and practitioners of the new Enlightenment science of economics, creating the modern impetus for developing systemic measures to avert famine, disease and the violent conflict that could arise from such crises.

As Amster outlines, these two philosophers have had an enduring and pervasive impact on our world, by providing a rationale for establishing modern society and for implementing theories of resource scarcity and conflict management that remain foundational to the ideology of national security and to the pernicious machinations of the war economy. Together, they have given shape to a "myth of scarcity," a "self-fulfilling downward spiral in which competition over perceived scarce resources only serves to further deplete them, in turn yielding deeper antagonisms and more rapid degradation" (Amster 2015, 27). Perpetuating this Hobbesian narrative is Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons," which is still taken as axiomatic by many practitioners of the environmental movement. Hardin posited that people cannot be trusted to utilize a common resource without destroying it, and he thus reasoned that our shared resources need to be managed by centralized entities that ostensibly defend the interests of the whole society from the ravages of local actors, even if that management occasionally entails injustice (Hardin 1968). Pinker suggests that the modern state has leveraged its Hobbesian monopoly on force to positive effect, as evidenced by reams of data he provides as proof of a precipitous decline in war and violence over the last two centuries. For Pinker, modernity is not to be blamed for atrocities such as the Shoah, but rather celebrated for having curbed them, and consequently he exhorts us to examine not only the causes of war but also the roots of peace (Pinker 2007).

Peace Ecology stands as a compelling answer to this call, and one that challenges Pinker's conclusions, by examining our successes without absolving modern paradigms of thought that have simultaneously expanded violence against people and planet. Amster reveals that community-based, locally- and regionally-scaled forms of social organization have catalyzed a litany of bottom-up victories for peace and justice that are a far cry from the vertically-aligned mechanisms of the state apparatus, suggesting that it is human community, rather than centralized political authority, that is responsible for the decline in violence we have seen. Emblematic of this lesson, and in stark contrast to Hardin's "tragedy of the commons," is the phenomenon of *common pool resources* (CPRs) analyzed in chapter two. CPRs were first studied and made part of the literature by economist and Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom, whose prolific

body of work demonstrates that “in fact the most sustainable forms of resource management are collective, cooperative, egalitarian and decentralized in nature” (Amster 2015, 55). Rather than disintegrating into warring factions of resource pillagers as Hardin predicted, “people in localities everywhere have crafted and maintained elegant solutions to what might otherwise become conflict-ridden scenarios involving competition over either scarce or abundant essential resources” (55).

These triumphs of what we might call *peacework* highlight the value of insights (central to both peace ecology and systems theory) suggesting that the problem is often the solution, and that reinforcing (amplifying) feedback loops can work just as much in favor of solutions as they can lead us careening toward catastrophe. Much as permaculturalists in arid zones design microclimates that mitigate water evaporation in order to promote the water-harvesting potential of the hydrological cycle, Amster claims that “the very same processes that create feedback loops of conflict-degradation in our economic and political arrangements can also be made to yield mutually supporting positive results as well,” and so “a potential self-fulfilling apocalypse can just as likely become a self-fulfilling utopia” (43). In cultivating such tipping points of love and compassion (Hanh 2008), we can become “collectively reenchanting” with the world as sacred space (chapter eight). Illustrating the wisdom of Donella Meadows’ conviction that the transcendence of paradigms is our most effective leverage point for intervening in any system (2008, 145-165), *Peace Ecology* emphasizes our power of free will in upgrading the “ideological software” that drives the war economy to a different way of thinking based on reciprocity, holistic thinking and interdependence with Earth systems. While this difficult work presents challenges in any age, its potential is surely far greater than either neo-Malthusian despair or neoliberal optimism: “This may seem idealistic, but consider that it is no more so than continuing on our present course and hoping for a happy ending” (Amster 2015, 45). We are glad to share this volume as a timely reminder that ecological literacy and peace studies provide a *necessary hope* for all humanity and a vehicle into which we can channel that hope into concrete action.

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