

# A New World Order

JAMES BECKER

**A** new world order is coming. The East-West conflict that dominated the international scene for the past 40 years is over. The unprecedented militarization of the world economy and the nuclear arms race spawned by the conflict suddenly seem anachronistic.

No one knows what the new order will look like. We do know that a promising future for generations to come requires that we reverse the environmental degradation of the planet at the same time that we make major efforts to expand the choices of the planet's six billion people. What might best constitute an agenda for the changing world? When, where, and how will it be determined?

Some priorities are suggested by the issues to be discussed in Rio 92, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development on June 1, in Rio de Janeiro. It is a 20th birthday party: in 1972 at Stockholm, the conference on the Human Environment was the first of a series of United Nations conferences on global issues including food, women, population, water, and science and technology.<sup>1</sup> With more than 25,000 people expected to attend — representing more than 160 governments and numerous private organizations, this year's conference might well be the most important event of the year. The issues highlighted and the priorities agreed upon could have an important bearing on the future of the planet.

According to Harlan Cleveland, "We the people of the United Nations

will take stock of our only Earth and its life-giving chemical and biological surroundings and try to agree how, from now on, to achieve economic growth with both social fairness and ecological prudence."

Harlan Cleveland poses the following questions about the issues the conference participants will face in trying to reconcile what's efficient with what's prudent and fair.

1. What claim do future generations have on today's decision makers? Should today's poor be favored over tomorrow's descendants of the affluent?

2. Rates of consumption is another name for rates of pollution. Can we stop subsidizing inefficiency (as in energy), surpluses (as in food), and toxic waste?

3. "We the people" will number 6.3 billion by the year 2000. Whether world population can be stabilized at 8 billion or 11 billion or 14 billion is the biggest single question about the global environment. Who should be doing what about this, and why aren't they?

4. Biological diversity, the basic library of the life sciences, is at risk, especially in tropical forests. Should we worry about this?

5. Outer space, the atmosphere, most of the oceans, and Antarctica are Global Commons. If these environments are not to be further polluted, who sets the outer bounds of human behavior in the Commons? Only those with the technical prowess to despoil Antarctica, foul the oceans, damage the ozone layer, spew out global-warming gases, and sprinkle debris in outer space? Or some agreed surrogate for the "everybody" who owns the Commons?

The discussions held and the priorities agreed upon at Rio 92 may

provide clues to the nature of the new world order. Will issues of environment and development and the need for increased cooperation to deal with these concerns top the world agendas? Or will narrow national interest and reliance on military power continue to play a major role in human affairs? Answers to these questions will be shaped not only by the Rio conference and actions of world leaders, but also by our visions and commitments and what we teach and what our students learn or fail to learn.

The momentous events in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union demonstrate that "the people" are increasingly being heard in high places. Citizen power seems to be on the rise. Are we preparing our citizens for a new world order? Are the issues they will be challenged to tackle on

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our agenda? How do we prepare citizens for intelligent and responsible participation in a new world order?

These issues and these ethical choices will require more than the traditional study of history and geography. The record of the past may not in and of itself be a sufficient guide to the future. Nor will merely increasing the emphasis on other nations, cultures, and people suffice. Rene Dubos, the eminent biologist, notes that national cultures are now "influenced as much by international technological forces as by local cultural forces." The study of science and

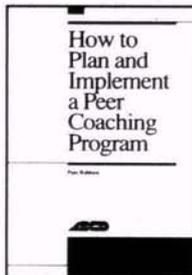
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technology, along with the social sciences and humanities, has become essential to citizen decision making in today's complex world.

Aldous Huxley argued that in the context of supersonic missiles, atomic warheads, and the population explosion, the human race can no longer afford the luxury of ignoring the ecological situation. We must "work for the survival of the species as a whole and for the actualization in the greatest number of men and women of their potential for good will, intelligence, and creativity."

As citizens living in a large, influential, multicultural, democratic society, our actions have an impact on others as well as on the physical and social environment. Citizenship education for a new world order must enable citizens to draw on the vast reservoir of human experience including, but not limited to, the knowledge and insights available through the study of Western civilization or the traditional disciplines. It also should help citizens identify public issues and prepare them to take prudent and effective action. This is the challenge educators face in seeking to develop curriculum frameworks to meet the challenges of a new era. □



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\*B. Ward and R. Dubos, (1972), *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.).

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