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THE MISSING PERSON IN CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY

Throughout his writings, lectures, public debates and personal discussions, my teacher, co-adventurer and, most importantly, friend, Peter Redpath, has issued a philosophically charged alarm: Something is radically wrong with Western culture! What that “something” is is the loss of the metaphysics of the human person.

Redpath exposes this loss as the source of a degenerative crisis which has debilitated philosophy, science, education and socioeconomics. Its historical genealogy extends back into Ancient times with the Sophists, but became most pervasive with the Modern Enlightenment. Redpath urges that an accurate understanding of the acting person, the sentient, embodied individual actively engaged in free personal relationships, must once again become a founding metaphysical principle of philosophy.¹ He exhorts all who have perceived in any depth this roiling crisis to strive to re-establish the primacy of the individual, embodied human person engaged in free personal action as a first principle of knowing, truth, science, philosophy and wisdom.

This essay heeds Redpath’s warning and accepts his exhortation that it is indeed a de-formation of the metaphysics of the human person

¹ Peter Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Manito Springs, CO: Socratic Press, 2012), 21. Hereafter cited as *NSECM*.

at the source of the crisis in Western culture. Redpath's etiology of the corruption of the human person and its disturbing effects are further elaborated by integrating the thoughts of Gabriel Marcel, a philosopher whom Redpath acknowledges as possessing a "legitimately philosophical wisdom."² Following Redpath and Marcel, this essay details some of the effects of the crisis by showing how in current Catholicism, the traditional Christian metaphysics of the human person is being supplanted by an emerging progressive spirituality, particularly in the areas of socioeconomics and environmentalism.

This spirituality does not qualify as a metaphysic according to traditional terms, but is indeed the result of the "missing person" in Catholic thought and teaching. It is a spirituality, more passion than intellect and reason, which can, most properly, be called a collectivist or holistic spirituality. It favors an abstract humanism that elides, if not denies, the person as an individual with free will immersed in the reality of concrete situations with other persons. It seeks to absorb the individual person into a collectivistic mass, a holistic spiritual oneness manifested in socioeconomics as utopian socialism or in environmentalism as an "integral ecology."³

Redpath and Marcel on the Lost Person in Utopian Socialisms

For Redpath, the crisis in Modern Western culture began to foment with Descartes and then exploded into an all-engulfing cultural phenomenon with Rousseau. Redpath argues that Descartes replaced the human soul with an incorporeal mind, which contained a collection of innate ideas. Descartes, moreover, primarily relocated truth, science and wisdom as acts of the will and not acts of the intellect or reason. Truth in all knowledge was thereby reduced to the strength of the will,

² Peter Redpath, "Gabriel Marcel and the Recovery of Philosophy in Our Time," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80:3 (Summer 2006): 343. Hereafter cited as Redpath, *ACPQ*.

³ This term is used in the Encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (May 2015), #11.

i.e., the will's relation to the intellect and not to acts of the intellect themselves. A strong will leading the intellect is the source of truth, whereas a weak will allows the intellect to succumb to imagination, which is the source of error.⁴ In effect, Descartes transformed wisdom, science and philosophy into a type of disembodied willpower having no concrete individual as its principle of origin. His view, as Redpath sees it, was a disordered understanding of the human person as pure spirit.⁵

Rousseau, however, was much more progressive than Descartes, extending the Cartesian disembodied intellect to an abstract collectivist reason, which was without any understanding of real human relationships, of individual, free rational or loving acts. For Redpath, with Rousseau there is some universal feeling, a sort of neo-Averroistic socialist intellect shared by tolerant people. Such tolerant people communicate the General Will of the body politic: a social will. Truth, then, is established by some fully inclusive social feeling, a socialist intellect shared by tolerant people collectively.⁶

Rousseau's collectivism bursted into Modern utopian scientific socialism. Socialism's tendency to deny individual freedom and individual intellect, as Redpath observes, are akin to Averroes's denial of knowledge, science and freedom to the individual mind and the existence of the individual soul after death, the eschatology of personal immortality. Utopian socialism, not the human person, becomes the new metaphysical foundation with its emphasis on the power of the General Will and its collectivist theory of truth.⁷ Tolerance became the 'voice of conscience' whose message is an inclusive socialist feeling for love of humanity and a willingness to incorporate all human differences into a higher moral status of socialistic collective conscience.⁸

⁴ See *NSECM*, 7.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ See *NSECM*, 18-19.

⁷ See *NSECM*, 23.

⁸ *Id.*

The free, concrete, individual human person is, however, lost in this undifferentiated abstract collective consciousness and tolerant conscience. The feeling for the love of humanity, an abstract humanism, is disconnected from the concrete loving relationships of individual human persons. At the expense of the individual human person, the collective feeling of love for humanity drives the General Will of this abstract humanism toward its utopian ideal, namely, an enlightened collective of humanity in which truth is established by the collective will of the tolerant conscience.

Of course, with such a collectivist utopian humanism, there cannot be factional political leadership and disputes over truth. There must be a collective government, an imperious centralized bureaucracy which arbitrates the General Will to determine truth.⁹ Consequently, science, including scientific education and economics, must be directed by the centralized government to ensure that their ‘truths’ properly serve the tolerant love of humanity and the utopian *desideratum*. Science, thereby, becomes dependent on the socialist state for its foundation and purposes, and the state itself substitutes for any real metaphysical first principles, including the metaphysics of the human person.

Marcel was no less alarmed than Redpath about the crisis afflicting the Modern West. Although Marcel did not specifically use the term “utopian socialism” as a driver of the crisis, he did consistently and strongly emphasize that socialism is causally integral to the crisis. Marcel believed that the crisis emerges from the “very depths of man’s being,”¹⁰ because “[m]an is in his death throes.”¹¹ This dire condition results from the degradation of man, particularly the degradation of freedom for the individual human person. As he expressed the situation:

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), 37. Hereafter cited as *MAMS*.

¹¹ See Redpath, *ACPQ*, 345–346.

“But what we have to ask ourselves first is the following question: what becomes of freedom in a world in which man, or at least man at a certain level of awareness, is forced to recognize that he has entered his death throes?”¹²

In a blunt self-identification of his political stance, Marcel once confessed that he is a classical “liberal,” though one “who has become more and more painfully aware of the limits of liberalism but who at the same time has remained convinced of the absolutely maleficent character of totalitarian regimes of any sort.”¹³ He believed in and defended the concrete reality of the free, individual human person, but rejected the distortions of individualism, the painful limits of liberalism that lead to a hyper-competitive society of atomic individuals.¹⁴ He also condemned all collectivisms because they lead to a totalitarian mass society wherein the mass, an abstractly aggregated humanity, is taken as more concrete and real than any human person individually.¹⁵

The convulsing tensions of individualism vs. collectivism are, for Marcel, precisely the death throes which are enervating the freedom of the individual human person and are the source of the “present universal crisis”¹⁶ in Western politics and society. He framed his approach for confronting this crisis by asking “how to get people out of the false

¹² *MAMS*, 15.

¹³ Gabriel Marcel, “An Autobiographical Essay,” trans. Forrest Williams, in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Hahn (La Salle, Open Court, 1984), 62–63. Hereafter cited as *AE*.

¹⁴ See John E. Smith, “The Individual, the Collective and the Community,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, 337.

¹⁵ See *MAMS*, 166. See also Thomas Michaud, “Gabriel Marcel’s Politics: Theory and Practice,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80:3 (Summer 2006): 435–451. This essay summarizes some of the much more extensive and detailed expositions of Marcel’s political thought presented in my cited article in the “Gabriel Marcel” ACPQ Volume that I edited and introduced.

¹⁶ Gabriel Marcel, *Searchings*, ed. Wolfgang Ruf (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 88.

dilemma between an imaginary individualism and a collectivism that denies the human personality.”¹⁷

The opposition between individualism and collectivism is false because both distort and degrade the human person. Collectivism, which includes socialism, erases the individual personality and stifles personal freedom. It subsumes individual persons into a faceless and de-personalized abstract mass. It advances an abstract humanism wherein tolerant egalitarianism is the supreme moral value, at the expense of allowing the concrete individual person’s free pursuit of truth, of loving personal relationships within a community, and a better quality of life.¹⁸ Marcel explicitly warns that the collective, socialistic state denies the interdependence between truth and freedom because “freedom can survive only in a climate of truth . . . and truth can be worthily pursued only where no external constraint (particularly from the state) is used against it.”¹⁹ When the socialist state supplants the human person as the metaphysical foundation for truth, knowledge and community, the free, individual human person is lost because socialism manages “to subordinate personal initiative in every field to state control.”²⁰

The individualism that opposes collectivism is, for Marcel, “imaginary” because it is a distortion of the human person’s essential relationships with other persons within community. Although he stresses that undermining the person as a free individual is a major factor in the crisis engulfing the West, Marcel is not a libertarian of any sort. Moreover, with his rejection of collectivist socialism, Marcel’s “liberal” self-identification should not be understood as endorsing the progressive liberalism that advances “big government” solutions to

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ Marcel cautioned that our nature as human persons is to be “in a situation of some sort of other, and this is what a too abstract kind of humanism always runs the risk of forgetting.” *MAMS*, 13.

¹⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 43. Hereafter cited as *TWB*.

²⁰ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, trans. Emma Crawford (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), 74. Hereafter cited as *HV*.

social problems and promotes a high-tax statist economy of redistributed wealth in order to finance government's social agenda of egalitarian tolerance. Marcel maintains that any person's concrete situation is within community and the relationships one has with others are vital for flourishing as a person.

John Smith clearly describes Marcel's views: "Community is essential for personality, because the intersubjectivity, or relation to the other, on which it is based, provides us with a means of discovering ourselves and finding our bearings in the world."²¹ Freely recognizing and choosing to act with such moral values as charity, hope and fidelity open persons to each other, "which unlike the self-assertive spirit of equality, means having a concern for the other."²² In this way community also "makes freedom possible because it is a form of life in which persons recognize each other as persons who are to be but who are not to be manipulated."²³

In sum, for Marcel, and Redpath would certainly agree, persons cannot flourish, cannot develop a genuine moral character unless they freely choose to relate morally with others in community. An imperious socialist state mandating the morality of egalitarian tolerance based on a love of an abstract collective humanity eliminates the possibility for concrete, individual persons to develop authentic community. In addition, a libertarian individualism that atomizes individuals occludes if not eliminates the moral possibilities for engaging with others in relationships of community that are recognized as essential for a person's flourishing. This is the alarming crisis in the West, for without a metaphysic of the human person, as developed in traditional Christian philosophy, man's "death throes" become more and more critical.

The dreams of a utopian socialism combined with a vehement rejection of individualism degrade the human person by ignoring the

²¹ Smith, "The Individual, the Collective, and the Community," 343.

²² *Id.*, 345.

²³ *Id.*

basic metaphysical principle that persons are free individuals within community. The confused thinking is that the concrete metaphysical reality of persons as free individuals cannot be affirmed without conceding to morally corrupt self-centered individualism, so only an abstract collectivism can be hailed as truth. Traditional Christian metaphysics of the person is lost and what is emerging is not a philosophical metaphysics, but a passionate spirituality, a spirituality driven by a nebulous feeling for the abstract unity of the whole of humanity and, indeed, all of creation. This holistic spirituality is becoming a new metaphysics, the foundation for determining the truth of how we ought to understand ourselves as persons and what our moral responsibilities are. Furthermore, as indicated earlier in this essay, this spirituality is becoming especially prevalent in the areas of Catholic approaches to socioeconomics and environmentalism.

The Spirituality of Catholic Economic Collectivism

Catholic commentators are swirling in the tensions between economic individualism and collectivism. Economic and social justice is perhaps the issue today for Catholic thought, though views founded on traditional metaphysics of the human person are eclipsed by the impassioned collectivist spirituality. One traditional commentator, Andrew Hertzog, argues, not unlike Marcel, that both individualism and collectivism are dangerous and morally wrong.²⁴ Both advance a humanism that distorts the human person. Collectivism erases the person's individuality in seeking to establish its egalitarian society, "the equality of all people politically, economically, and socially."²⁵ Individualism styles itself as a humanism since it is centered on the subjective goals

²⁴ Andrew Hertzog, "What the Catholic Church Thinks about Individualism and Catholicism" (May 14, 2012), para. 2. Retrieved from <http://baronhertzog.hubpages.com/hub/Does-the-Catholic-Church-Support-Collectivism-or-Individualism-Neither>, accessed on Jan 15, 2016.

²⁵ Id., para. 1.

and values of each individual, though it claims that the individual has no necessary obligation to be responsible to the community.²⁶

Daren Jonescu is forcefully critical of the Church's "general trend" toward progressive collectivism.²⁷ He denounces the trend as valuing an "irrational authoritarianism," that advances state control and as having a pronounced "anti-individual streak."²⁸ Jonescu warns that this general trend is too often not recognized because it does not honestly identify itself. The Catholic Church has officially condemned the collectivisms of socialism and communism, consequently those speaking for the Church or representing their views as within the Church do not explicitly self-identify as socialist or communist. Their moralistic spirituality of progressive collectivism is cloaked but nevertheless detectable.²⁹

A prime example of a zealous, but masked, progressive spirituality is with the commentator Victor Gaetan.³⁰ Gaetan interpretively reports on Pope Francis's visit to South America in July/August 2015. Because of the interpretations, it is uncertain whether the Holy Father said, meant and did what Gaetan claims. What is certain, however, is that Gaetan's spirituality is boldly collectivist, though he does not self-identify as a socialist.

In his rendition, Gaetan claims that a principle theme of the Pope's visit was the social "inclusion" accomplished by egalitarian tolerance. For instance, Gaetan describes an incident when leftist Bolivian President Evo Morales gave Pope Francis a Soviet-style hammer-

²⁶ See *id.*, para. 2.

²⁷ Daren Jonescu, "Catholics and Communists," *American Thinker* (Dec 3, 2013), para. 13. Retrieved from http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2013/12/catholics_and_communists.html, accessed on Jan 16, 2016.

²⁸ *Id.*, para. 1.

²⁹ See *id.*, para. 20.

³⁰ Victor Gaetan, "Pope's South-American Visit Solidifies his Papal Vision," *National Catholic Register* (July 26 – Aug. 8, 2015 Issue). Retrieved from http://www.ncregister.com/site/print_article/45949/, accessed on Jan 20, 2016. All of the following quotes in this section are from this Gaetan article.

and-sickle crucifix, and Gaetan notes that Francis was not offended because he interpreted it as an artistic expression. Also in Bolivia, Gaetan characterizes the Holy Father's message in an address to the second World Meeting of Popular Movements as "a scathing rebuke of socioeconomic systems prioritizing individualism and capital." He continues by insisting that Pope Francis' vision "can be seen as largely at odds with characteristics of the United States – as a capitalist and military powerhouse with global reach, and engine of consumerism and individualism."

Gaetan further explains the Pope's rebuke of the United States by indicating that the "Church criticizes both capitalism and socialism for allowing government control to displace individual and local decision-making." This criticism for Gaetan, however, was apparently merely tactical since "while communism was a world threat for most of the 20th century, it wasn't common for the Catholic Church to vocally confront capitalism, because such confrontation could be interpreted as benefiting the atheistic powers allied with the Soviet Union." In other words for Gaetan and his socialist ilk, the Church denounced communism and socialism only because of the atheism of the Soviets and other major communist powers, and not at all because of the ways such authoritarian socioeconomic degraded the free individual human person. In fact, with Gaetan's passionate spirituality, it seems that socialism actually fortifies the Catholic teaching of subsidiarity, "which prioritizes the smallest, local decision-making body that can solve a problem over big answers that don't acknowledge individual preferences." Without a rational metaphysics of the person, zealous "true believers" like Gaetan can convince themselves that in a socialist utopia the subsidiarity of free individual preferences and decisions can be preserved, protected and enhanced, although in economics and even morality that possibility is fundamentally contrary to the ideology, actual practice and history of socialist governments.

As a final observation on Gaetan's 'report,' it is telling that he references *Laudato Si* and alludes to its concept of an "integral ecology."³¹ In describing the altar for a mass Pope Francis said in Paraguay, Gaetan notes that it was made from edible materials, e.g., corn, gourds, pumpkins, seeds, etc. He says that this "proved the creativity of believers responding to the idea of recycling as well as respect for Mother Earth, as people in the Andes do." In Gaetan's holistic spirituality, economic collectivism is inclusive of aggressive environmentalism, since individualism and capitalism threaten our home, the Earth. Consequently, his spirituality of integral ecology apparently even allows for a sort of eco-paganism that will acknowledge a type of 'Gaeian goddess,' Mother Earth.

The Spirituality of Catholic Environmentalism

In 1995 the Catholic Bishops of the USA's Appalachia region issued a pastoral letter, "At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Message on Sustainable Community Appalachia from the Catholic Bishops of the Region." Brian O'Donnell describes this letter as a "green version" of the 1975 letter, "This Land is Home to Me: A Pastoral Letter on Powerlessness in Appalachia by the Catholic Bishops of the Region."³² Both letters express in poetic fashion a holistic spirituality and emphatically convey its utopianism. As O'Donnell notes, the 1995 letter "ends with an echo of the close of the 1975 letter: Dear sisters and brothers, we urge all of you not to stop living, to be a part of the rebirth of utopia, to recover and defend the struggling dream of Appalachia itself."³³ These letters also prefigure the integration of human ecology with natural ecology within the utopian socialist spirituality of progressive integral ecology.

³¹ See above note #3.

³² Fr. Brian O'Donnell, S.J., "Our 'Common Home' and 'God's Sacred Appalachia,'" *The Catholic Spirit* (Sept 18, 2015): 6.

³³ *Id.*, 6. Both the 1975 and 1995 letters can be accessed at: www.catholicconferencewv.org

Maureen Mullarkey, a traditionalist commentator, recognizes the emergence of utopian “eco-spirituality,” warning that Catholicism could be sliding into “nature mysticism” and that a sort of “messianic environmentalism” could assume the “status of dogma.”³⁴ She describes ‘save the planet’ spiritual ardor as being integral to some Catholics’ religious belief that is founded upon eliminating and reversing anthropogenic global warming (AGW). Citing the words of atmospheric physicist John Reid, she indicates that AGW is

the central tenet of this new belief system in much the same way that the Resurrection is the central tenet of Christianity . . . My skepticism about AGW arises from the fact that, as a physicist who has worked in closely isolated areas, I know how poor the underlying science is. In effect, the scientific method has been abandoned in this field.³⁵

As eco-spirituality has it, AGW is mainly the result of Western economic growth and voracious consumerism which must be rejected in favor of a spiritual conversion that finds God dwelling in all things, the union of creation and Creator. Mullarkey describes such belief as a “nature mysticism” that aims at sacralizing the natural world, a nature piety that evokes an eco-paganism motivated by anti-capitalist fervor. Mullarkey further recognizes that like Marxism, which used ‘science’ to demonstrate the ‘truths’ of its utopian aims, eco-spirituality seeks authoritarian controls in economics and subordinates “science to the advocacy needs of politics.”³⁶

Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson, head of the Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice, delivered the opening address at a four-day conference on climate change at Boston College. Turkson exhorted the

³⁴ Maureen Mullarkey, “Is the Catholic Church Drifting into Eco-Spirituality?” (May 28, 2015). Retrieved from <http://thefederalist.com/2015/05/28/is-the-catholic-church-drifting-into-eco-spirituality/>, accessed on Jan 20, 2016. Much of what follows paraphrases and directly quotes Mullarkey’s article.

³⁵ *Id.*, para. 5.

³⁶ *Id.*, para. 18.

USA to lead a global effort to combat climate change. As Brian Roewe reports, Turkson urged that

Today, American support for the United Nations and American international leadership are more needed than ever, specifically to help solve the crisis of climate change. This may well be the most important challenge of the 21st century. It calls for global dialogue and leadership. It is a moral issue of the highest order. No country can tackle this problem alone, nor can the poorer ones without much help.³⁷

Clearly Turkson's eco-spirituality is animated by a messianic zeal. He believes strongly that "America can marshal its best resources to solve the climate challenge and protect our common home . . ."³⁸ The real practical and scientific question of whether it is possible literally to control and alter the condition of climate in order to save the planet from disastrous climate change is not even broached by Turkson and the eco-spirituality zealots. What is definitely possible to change, however, as Turkson advocates, is socioeconomics. Turkson calls for a massive global redistribution of wealth based on the belief that capitalism, which is in effect synonymous with "individualism," is the cause of the climate change problem. He insists that "[w]hen many act on private self-interest, it endangers the common home. The roots of the problem are the bondage of individualism and putting short-term gain above longer-term sustainability."³⁹ What Turkson means, in the words of Roewe, is that practical judgments must be made and authoritatively executed, "such as repaying the 'ecological debt' of the global north to the global south; placing the global common good above national inter-

³⁷ Brian Roewe, "At Boston College, Turkson maps 'Laudato Si' path to Paris climate agreement," *National Catholic Reporter* (Oct 2, 2015). Retrieved from <http://naronline.org/print/blogs/eco-catholic/boston-college-turkson-maps-lavdato-si-path-paris-climate-agreement>, accessed on Jan 25, 2016.

³⁸ Id. This is a quote from Cardinal Turkson as reported by Roewe.

³⁹ Id. Roewe's report of the words of Cardinal Turkson.

est; avoiding a profit-first ideology; and replacing ‘without delay’ highly polluting fossil fuels.”⁴⁰

Turkson’s “integral ecology” is messianic not only to save the planet from climate change but also from capitalist economic development which is devastating our common home. Turkson apparently wants a new global economic order, a morally superior global socialism that is as collectivistic as his eco-spirituality. It is a spirituality that, as his Catholic ilk believes, transcends traditional Christian metaphysics and reorders what it means to be an individual human person so that the free individual person is subsumed into the greater collective world order.

Final Remarks

Redpath’s and Marcel’s warnings of a crisis in the West are not mere abstruse philosophical clamor. The crisis is degrading the free individual human person. With the opposition to socioeconomic individualism as a foil, perhaps even a straw man pretext, socialistic collectivism ascends as a utopian solution for socioeconomic inequality and the apocalyptic threat of climate change. The free individual person, however, goes missing with this solution, as well as the person’s capacity for knowing truth. Truth in science, economics and environmentalism becomes more and more dictated by the collective, which is ultimately authoritarian and politically advantageous. Moral truth is also subverted by the egalitarian tolerance that the collective imposes as requisite for achieving its promised utopia.

With the subversion of traditional metaphysics of the human person, the emerging Catholic spirituality of integral ecology certainly can be seen as born of the crisis. It is fixed on a messianic end of attaining a moral, socioeconomic and environmental utopia. It may be deeply heartfelt, but it is unfortunately headless because it does not understand rationally the damage being done to the human person. It aims to serve

⁴⁰ Id. Another Roewe’s report of a Cardinal Turkson statement.

and even save 'global humanity' but does not comprehend that such a collectivist objective is nothing but an 'abstract humanism,' which as Redpath and Marcel caution is at the very source of the crisis. The concrete, free individual human person is truly missing in the Catholic spirituality of integral ecology.

THE MISSING PERSON IN CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY

SUMMARY

Peter Redpath and Gabriel Marcel warn that the West is engulfed in a crisis. From their various philosophical perspectives, they identify the source of the crisis as a distortion of traditional Christian metaphysics of the human person as a free individual capable of pursuing truth and entering into relations of community with others. The distortion is caused by an abstract humanism that rightly denounces individualism, but as an alternative promotes a socialistic collectivism. This essay argues that this distortion is further causing the emergence of a collectivist spirituality which loses the individual, free human person. This spirituality is shown to be particularly manifest in various Catholic approaches to socioeconomics and environmentalism.

KEYWORDS: Peter Redpath, Gabriel Marcel, West, crisis, Christianity, metaphysics, person, society, humanism, individualism, collectivism, spirituality, culture, socioeconomics, environmentalism.