

Abstract: This paper offers an extended review of the Australian environmentalist Ted Trainer's concept of the 'conservers society', which presents a direct challenge to the materialism which so dominates Western values and lifestyles. Trainer's work also offers a challenge to geographers and planners concerned with the promotion of ecological values and community-based planning, since it provides a practical set of options for environmentally friendly social and economic systems.

Ted Trainer and the 'conservers society':

- Simon PJ Batterbury -

The term 'conservers society' has made infrequent appearances in modern environmentalist literature. In the late 1970s the Science Council of Canada issued a rather cautious policy document which questioned the "ever-growing **per capita** demand for consumer goods" in Canada (SCC, 1977, p14), and suggested over-consumption in the West may be countered by a "joyous austerity" which would combine simpler living and considerably lower **per capita** resource use with heightened environmental protection (Paehlke, 1989, p138). The term has recently surfaced in the work of the British Campaign for Political Ecology's 'Conserver Manifesto', which calls on the major political parties to adopt a radical plan to tailor consumption, population growth, and resource use to realistic levels falling within the Earth's 'carrying capacity'. But the best-known proponent of conserver values is the Australian environmentalist and philosopher Ted Trainer, who has previously issued direct challenges to affluence and over-development in western economies

(Trainer, 1985; 1989). He describes a set of values and ecological goals which have many parallels with the work of committed radical geographers and some social ecologists. and which could underpin profound change in Western economic and social systems. The publication of his latest text (Trainer, 1995c) provides us with the opportunity to summarise the important practicalities and problems involved in living out and supporting conserver values. This paper therefore offers a sympathetic but critical reading of *The Conserver Society*.

As Giddens (1994) has recently suggested, the ecological movement is unlikely to be taken seriously as a real alternative to mainstream politics unless it can appeal to the majority of western consumers by moving beyond glib statements of nightmare futures and ecological destruction. Too often, doom-laden economics and Malthusian predictions deaden public appreciation of real environmental problems and risks, placing environmental issues well below the demands of economic development and consumerism. Trainer's book significantly advances the environmentalist cause by proposing practical and workable solutions to the predicament of global 'crisis' under advanced forms of capitalist development. A sane and environmentally sensitive future is entirely possible, if based on a radical alternative society consisting of low-impact and sensitive 'conserve? lifestyles. Most of his latest book, bar the opening summary section, concerns itself with the practicalities of how this conserver society may be brought about, particularly in small towns and suburbs where large numbers of people live and work.

Trainer is uncompromising in his assertion that "the present consumer way of life we take for granted in rich countries is totally unsustainable" (p2). Echoing the central message of *Abandon Affluence* (Trainer, 1985), he embraces 'ecocentric' views, which necessarily involve a commitment to a simpler (but still diverse) lifestyle. Western values and social relations involve what De Walt (1988, p114) calls the "tilt towards gratification": rampant consumerism, as well as unsustainable economic growth, and unworkable geographies. Growth, and social values which underpin it (the profit motive, materialism and the enterprise culture), lie at the very heart of global inequality and environmental problems. The rich nations are existing on per *capita* levels of resource consumption which cannot continue, and are selling the ideology of economic development to developing nations. This will only exacerbate poverty, spatial inequalities and resource depletion. As proponents of zero-growth economics such as Daly (1992) have argued, the third world will never be able to attain western levels of industrialisation and living

standards, since environmental resources are finite and insufficient to allow affluence for all of us. The motto of a more just and humane society must therefore be "... the rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live".

Some of the easy ways to create greener and sustainable forms of urban living discussed in the book will already be familiar, for example, the need to install community allotments. Ponds and food gardens could replace much unproductive parkland, lawns and derelict sites, bringing the production of more food closer to the point of consumption in urban areas. Trainer is a fan of zero input, high yield permaculture systems where climates permit (p29), tailored by local populations to their particular soil and water regimes and requiring low labour inputs. Durable housing, which recycles all wastes for energy and fertiliser (p38), may be built cheaply using mud brick, recycled materials, and renewable energy sources wherever possible. Yet, for me, there are intractable problems in the development of sustainable communities along these lines where existing urban areas suffer decaying infrastructure, poor design, low levels of home ownership and insecure tenure, and where transport and pollution problems are severe. It is not clear, for example, how blocks of inner city' apartments could be made self-sufficient in water, electricity and sewerage in the ways Trainer suggests for his self-built housing projects and eco-villages. Dense existing settlements may have to retain 'interim' non-sustainable systems such as local small power stations, and rely heavily on small allotments and roof-spaces for limited food supply (Trainer, 1995b).

Nonetheless, these are important issues that must concern urban geographers and ecologists. In chapters 6-9, Trainer sets out his agenda for the reorganisation of economic activities under conserver principles. Here are a set of ideas, dogmatic at times, which bring us back to the notion of de-centred and endogenous economic development, but coupled with sweeping changes in social organisation. Through more sharing and more care, a simpler but adequate living standard may be maintained by all citizens. Re-directing our affluent tastes to more modest ones would do away with useless luxury items such as "sports cars, speedboats and electric door chimes" (p52), and reduce our tastes for expensive imported goods and holiday travel to escape from our bleak surroundings by creating "leisure-rich" environments on our own doorsteps (p53). Trainer is keen to stress that a conserver lifestyle does not mean shortages, and going without basic necessities. Yet his real project is the development of many small, highly self-sufficient settlements, and 'village'

suburbs drawing most of the goods and services they need from close by, thus cutting processing and distribution costs. Municipalities would, wherever possible, organise their own hospitals, schooling, health care and other services (p189). Derelict land and a percentage of road networks and parking space should be converted into an “edible landscape” of gardens, woodlots and ponds. Ideally, suburban neighbourhoods, comprising perhaps fifteen to twenty-five dwellings at most, would be clustered around a larger suburban centre with good public transport facilities. In rural areas the small town would provide the community focus. The land between settlements would be devoted to agriculture. and the transport system itself restructured to reflect lower vehicle use and better cycling provision. City centres would remain the preserve of major cultural venues, universities. courts and essential higher-level services.

A “completely co-operative and rational economy” (p92) must accompany such sweeping changes to regional geographies, and this is covered briefly in chapter 8. The argument is made that capitalism necessarily produces spatial inequalities. But economic growth is a “deeply entrenched myth” (p77), and reliance on the market sidelines issues of human need and equity (see Trainer, 1995a; Marglin & Guderman, forthcoming). Of course a move to a low or zero-growth economy, freed from the trap of “producing and consuming”, would initially be painful, and we lack real-world examples of how such a transition may realistically be carried out. Ingenious economic buffers would be needed to protect the participants of the alternative. conserver economy against the predations of capitalist market forces. Prices, for example, would probably rise for goods produced locally and in smaller quantities than before. However local production, in smaller factories and enterprises, would accompany “simple but sufficient living standards, far less production, local self-sufficiency, co-operation” and a “restricted cash sector” (p80), offering an alternative set of transactional relationships and incentives to producers and consumers. Trainer, like certain social ecologists. talks of the local control of the means of production as being an essential mechanism to protect neighbourhoods and shaky, new conserver values from the shock of plant closures, the nefarious actions of multinational corporations, and the damaging effects of global restructuring such as the mobility of key employers and capital and the withdrawal of profits to distant sites. De-linking from world markets, as John Friedmann (1992) has suggested, can lead to healthy local alternative economic systems arising through necessity and through choice. Local Economic Trading Systems (LETS), local trading currencies, local banking. and the exchange of basic foodstuffs for labour are all anti-capitalist

strategies to which neighbourhoods may turn. The removal of the need to earn a sufficient and rising cash income would, Trainer feels, improve the quality of life for citizens by reducing the hours spent in earning money. Indeed many alternative communities working along conservator lines already perform essential tasks like house-building entirely through co-operative effort, not through cash payments to craftsmen and labourers (p152). In this new society, technological change would emerge from a real need for innovations, as well as from simple curiosity and experimentation - not through the entrepreneurial drive towards seeking higher profits. Of course, it is **recognised** that larger firms would be needed to produce essential items such as pharmaceuticals, complex machinery and heavy engineering; these would be centrally located although much more closely tied to the forces of demand than to profit motivation. The energy requirements of the conservator society are given separate treatment in chapter 9, where Trainer is sanguine about the potential of wind, wave and solar power (especially in low latitudes and where winter heating is required) to meet current energy needs unless consumption is dramatically reduced. While a shift to renewables is a necessary 'core' change, their increased use does not tackle the basic crisis of over-consumption which raises energy demand in the first place. Trainer argues that there simply cannot be enough solar panels, lead batteries and windmills to service our present lifestyle without an overall reduction in energy use.

The implications of these extensive changes are dealt with in a third section (chapters 11- 16). A short chapter is devoted to the values underlying the conservator ideal. Trainer is hopeful of the rising appeal of communal and conservator ideals to the public, who would be driven by economic necessity to consider them on their merits (p153). Yet his hope may be unrealistic for social classes presently denied the luxury of reflecting deeply on environmental concerns, or trapped financially by the 'rat-race' (Pahl, 1995). Trainer does admit that the changes will be gradual. Sharing, co-operation, friendliness and giving would be rewarded and encouraged while the desire for individual advancement and competition would be channelled into more productive pursuits (p134). Concurring with ecofeminist thinkers, the author sees a need for these conservator ideals to arise out of caring, nurture and friendship; traits now poorly emphasised in schools, the media, and advertising. Furthermore, full participation in the daily running of alternative settlements would require an active, fulfilling lifestyle and a variety of practical and organisational skills. These are ideas which appear in the work of Giddens and Pahl, who have exposed the anxieties and disillusionment which

accompany the drive for success and advancement so pervasive in modern life. Still, one wonders what will become of individuality, perversity, stubbornness, and the desire to struggle; these can also serve us well when faced with adversity and hardship. How would these characteristics be channelled, if faced with an advancing wave of well-behaved conserver citizens'? Could a local community contain them?

Teachers and educators, especially those with environmental credentials, are directed to chapter 16 where Trainer blows out of the water the drudgery and performance-driven systems operating in most schools and colleges. He asserts that the academy serves the needs of consumers, not conservers and good citizens, points already raised elsewhere (e.g. **Huckle**, 1993). Australia's educational system is seen as being needlessly "restructured to churn out more technocrats and business managers in order to restore our national economic competitiveness" (p170). While this may be true at the national scale, is it also true for Australia's now-numerous radical environmentalists, who occupy that same system? Trainer argues that much education could be drawn back into local neighbourhoods and settlements, reserving higher level institutes for specialised instruction as required. Learning would be undertaken in order to make socially useful contributions to the community, not to obtain educational 'credentials' needed for material success and which require "years of boring and largely irrelevant coursework". The point could have been made that we have many examples on which to draw; not least in the South.

Part three of the book provides current examples of some existing conserver settlements and communities, in an effort to illustrate that alternative lifestyles are not simply utopian pipe dreams or the faded memories of sixties lifestyle experiments. Critics of ecological anarchism and social ecology should take note! The places discussed include a communal farm near Lismore, NSW, the Israeli kibbutz movement, and the town of Maleney, Queensland. These examples are helpful: writers like Trainer are consistently criticised for failing to provide practical illustrations". **Pigface Point**, Trainer's own property in the Sydney suburbs, is also described. This is not a communal settlement but a small, working farm and educational resource centre run on conserver principles and renewable energy (Figure 1). Many items and buildings are made from scavenged or re-used materials, and most products (including household wastes) are re-used or recycled. Car use is minimal, and large parts of the site are devoted to recreational uses including children's play areas and demonstrations. There are workshops, craft studios and examples of earth bricks and self-made concrete, metal and wood items. Visiting the farm in

SYDNEY

Figure 1: Ted Trainer at Pigface Point, ~~Lismore~~ NSW, AUSTRALIA

Ted Trainer is on the left. The pottery and the self-built forge are visible on the right.



1995, I was struck by how the conservor lifestyle relies on the once-vital skill of bricolage: the fun of making and repairing useful items, adapting them for other uses, and constructing new things from scratch. A conservor society needs these skills, yet they are never required in the training of politicians, local government officers, planners, or academics (even geographers)!

The last section of the book (chapters 18-19), is more reflective in tone, and makes the interesting point that for us to make the transitions proposed in the text is “entirely an educational problem” (p210) since only if public awareness be raised sufficiently will the necessity for new lifestyles appear attractive and urgent, and the changes be set in motion. Trainer believes radical structural change in the economy and the geography of consumer society will only come about through persuasion and education, not, in his view, by limited numbers of people adopting greener lifestyles or throwing their weight behind single-interest pressure groups. But, for me, the visible destruction of the environment must surely gain supporters for the environmental cause, as do the actions of the new, more outspoken, environmentalists such as the British

anti-roads lobby, Earth First, the anti-nuclear coalitions, and campaigners for human and animal rights across the world. Trainer, however, attacks some of these institutions, as well as green political lobbies and the enlightened environmental agencies, for ‘band-aiding’ the problems generated by a greedy society, through their campaigns or political actions. It is easy to let people think that “saving the whale, traffic-calming, or recycling” are righting environmental wrongs and will make things better. Thus, the public continue to embrace affluence when they are able to, without seeing that economic growth will continue to bring wave upon wave of environmental problems for future generations (p2 13). Here, Trainer is careful to distance his peaceful anarchism from classical socialist thought. A socialist analysis, he feels, rightly exposes the inevitable contradictions of capitalism and the inevitability of change (Trainer, 1995b), but has tended in the past to be dismissive of ‘limits to growth’ arguments and ecological questions more generally. This point has been made many times, and is contested in journals such as *Society and Nature*, *Capitalism Nature Socialism* and *Rethinking Marxism*. A ‘limits to growth’ perspective suggests that we need to de-develop, not throw affluence at poverty without regard for resource limitations and environmental consequences. This underlying contradiction is often the source of acrimony between Reds and Greens, and frustrates meaningful dialogue and social change (Atkinson, 1991; Redclift, 1984, Pepper 1996). Trainer tries to sideline these red-green differences by proposing a concrete strategy to promote conserver values, which is again anarchist in approach. He suggests the need to educate, but also to simply *ignore* capitalist ways in everyday life. Eventually this would paralyse consumer society, if sufficient numbers make the shift away from materialism in their values and lifestyle. As recent planning decisions by the Department of the Environment in the UK have shown, however, communities ‘opting out’ of modern society and attempting to produce their own food and goods are guaranteed to receive a hard time from governments, and will tax the patience of large corporations and the commercial marketing machine who are unable to profit from them. In fact, it is generally admitted that the **large** corporations could easily **scupper** the emerging conserver society by closing down essential services and **firms** before local co-operatives are ready to replace them; Trainer is not naive enough to ignore this obvious point, although his arguments will be hotly disputed. His hope is that

[I]f increasing numbers of people move to the slow lane where they can live satisfactorily without consuming much then capitalism is doomed. It fears nothing so much as declining sales. No corporation **will** ever sell me

fashionable clothes or a sports car. If we make it convenient and attractive for more and more people to move to conservator ways, capitalism will shrivel and die (p220).

In concluding, Trainer issues a rallying cry to educators and campaigners to rethink their work and the ways in which environmental messages are put across. Not a fan of violent campaigns or direct confrontation, he urges that the benefits of conservator ways need to be raised in the classroom, in everyday conversation, through the media? and in sympathetic initiatives at all scales from the neighbourhood to national policy. These could include creating living displays, (such as those at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, at New Alchemy in Massachusetts, and at Trainer's own property in Sydney), and promoting alternative events, courses and tours which illustrate the workability of a modal shift in values and social organisation. Enthusiastic and committed individuals can begin planning *now* for the future implementation of conservator ideals in their communities by conducting audits, encouraging joint food production and other activities such as LETS schemes, winning over the ardent supermarket-goers, and living out or 'prefiguring' (Pepper 1996) conservator values for all to see. I would add that it is also necessary to support and monitor innovative ventures: in Walsall in the British Midlands, an attempt is being made to replace the local state with locally run municipalities; a movement towards conservator goals, perhaps? Geographers should heed Trainer's message that our basic task is to

... sow the seeds, the ideas and understandings and values, from which a sustainable society can *grow* whenever the opportunity for that actually arises (9220).

This is satisfying agenda for our discipline, which is insufficiently developed by geographers; it combines our strengths in explaining environmental transformations and social change (Kates, 1987; Peet & Watts, 1993; Turner *et al.*, 1990), with a greater concern for problem-solving and relevance (Knight, 1986). Nonetheless, the championing of ecological, feminist and justice movements - particularly in the South - receive scant mention. While they also lie outside Trainer's remit here, the struggle for democracy and reform is an important arena for environmental action.

Environmental thought has emerged in part as a reaction to modern life (Giddens, 1994), but Trainer follows Lipietz (1995) and many other writers in offering a direct challenge to the market ethos and consumerism. The acceptance of his argument hinges on whether the tools and methods of the conservator society will be powerful enough to overcome its opponents. At the

present time, it is too early to say, since his case is still unproven given the youth of the movement he hopes to build. There are niggling doubts about the workability of some of his ideas. Yet examples are already up and running for anybody who takes the time to see. Perhaps one of the most important messages to emerge is that many of the issues being raised in Agenda 21 and other international environmental initiatives are simply palliative measures which bow to the inevitability of regional 'development', skewed economic growth, and mobile, profit-seeking multinational firms (see also Theobald, 1996). These initiatives minimise the environmental and social impacts of economic activity, despite their fine rhetoric. But if there really are limits to the lifestyles most of us enjoy in the West, Trainer is correct, I think, to stress the dissemination of clear messages as the starting-point to initiate a shift in values. Education is only a beginning, but a vital one. Visible actions such as major and long-lasting lifestyle changes, are equally vital. Without them, even the socially committed amongst us will continue to preach, without engaging personally. For as Trainer points out,

It is not that we grab in a consciously greedy way, but that by insisting on a normal, nice house and car we are subscribing to standards that we can achieve only if we take far more resources than all could have. (p137)

Fortunately, more and more people are now rejecting those standards and beginning to live more simply. Some Greens are still unable to take on this degree of personal commitment, and may still define struggle and campaigning as their prime motivation. But there is no reason that the practicalities of Trainer's vision should be sidelined while we wait for change. Trainer's vision is of a society which works in the pragmatic sense of human survival and modest environmental impacts. We know that economic forces are frustrating change, and that democracy is slow in coming. But let us all agree that consumer values, and ignorance of their effects, hold back the sorts of radical (and perhaps inevitable) changes proposed in this book.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ted Trainer for taking the time to discuss some of the ideas presented here during my visit to Sydney in the summer of 1995.

Footnotes

1. The Campaign for Political Ecology, strongly supports the 'limits to growth' position, and advocates a reduction in population levels. Many of its organisers

were former members of the Green Party, but split over this and other 'basics' of political and environmental policy.

2. See the Dialogue on Socialism and Ecology between James O'Connor and Takis Fotopoulos (*Society & Nature* 6, pp176-214). If anything, more space in the book could have been devoted to the problems faced by these communities; the hardships of the kibbutz movement, and the arguments of its critics, are glossed over to some extent.

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