UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: THEORIES OF THE PRESENT

edited by

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Chapter 30

Intimate choices

Ken Plummer

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s [sic] acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were from outside... I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes (Berlin, 1969: 131).

Isaiah Berlin’s notable remark captures the views of many people living in the West as they think about their intimate lives at the turn of the century. Despite the critical onslaught on ‘humanism’ from many directions, the idea that we are autonomous human beings who can choose the kind of personal life we wish to live has become a deeply entrenched one. We surely must be allowed to choose, for example, who (and if) to marry, as well as when to divorce; how many children we can have and indeed what kind of erotic life we are to lead and with whom (be it bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual or monosexual). To suggest the opposite – that others can tell us who to marry, or when we can have children or what kind of sex we should have – is to suggest a world that some see as rapidly in decline. Intimacy in the late modern, globalizing Western world has been shaped massively by the rise of an individualist ideology which seems to proliferate with personal choices. For many – the poor, the unemployed, the old – these choices may be frustratingly limited; but for others, they may be wide and growing.

To get the issue clear at the outset: who would have thought at the start of the twentieth century that by its very end we would be seriously discussing such matters as:

- new families: divorce, ‘single mothers’, out of wedlock conception, cohabitation, remarriage, single parenting, gay partnerships, living alone;
- new reproductive technologies: surrogate mothers, test-tube babies, in vitro fertilization (IVF), egg donation, artificial insemination by donor (AID), gamete and intra-fallopian transfer (GIFT), widespread contraception, the decline of male fertility and fertility boosting;
- new body technologies: silicon implants, heart pacemaking implants, genetic engineering, ‘cyborgs’;
- new sexualities: non-procreative, non-penetrative, non-reproductive, ‘recreational’, same sex, ‘safer’ sex, telephone sex, cybersex, sex work, sadomasochism and the fetish scene;
- sexual abuses: rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, marital rape, date/acquaintance rape, child sexual abuse;
- new genders: new men, post-feminist women, bisexualities, gender benders, queers, transgender warriors, lesbian daddies, dyke boys and drag kings;

The list could go on. It simply flags new choices and debates around intimacies that have been appearing during the last decades of the twentieth century. Not everyone is engaged with them, but a lot of people are. And each one of these issue compounds the questions: How do we live and how are we to live in an emerging late/post-modern world? From a great many sources, there are signs – at century’s end, at the end of the millennium – that some personal lives are changing in very significant ways. We could see them as instances of increasing regulation, control and discipline; but we could also see them as instances where some are gaining a greater control over their lives.

POST-MODERN INTIMACIES?

This entire book is concerned with a characterization of change and the present. Just what kind of society are we living in, and what are the worlds of intimacies we find there? A leading North American sociologist of sexuality, William Simon, has recently argued that we may now increasingly be
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living our lives in ways that are different from any that humanity has previously known (Simon, 1996: 3). For him, this is the post-modern, or post-paradigmatic, age, characterized by an intense pluralization, individuation and a multiplicity of choices, unknown in any other era. Rapid social change has become our normal condition. The modern world has seen change speeding up and impacting more and more lives. Consensual meanings have dissolved into pluralism, authority has been weakened, 'choices' have proliferated, time and space have become reorganized, and what we take for 'the natural' has been deconstructed and denaturalized. Processes have been put into play which increasingly recognize differences, relativities, changes: potential chaos yet enormous possibility. With this comes the radical options for new intimacies divorced from traditional religions, traditional family structures, traditional communities, traditional politics and traditional restricted communication channels.

Yet these changes should not be overstated. While Simon's account captures rapid social change in our sexual lives, most of the empirical research done on sexuality in recent years suggests just how conservative most of our sexual behaviours remains (cf. Laumann et al., 1994; Wellings et al., 1994). We are, I think, living simultaneously in traditional, modern and post-modernizing worlds.

Traditional intimacies are still to be found embedded in intimate communities, surrounded by families, neighbours, and strong bonding rituals. For many people, traditional worlds remain their core. For many elderly in the West and most families outside the West, for example, the prevalence of new forms of intimacy is minimal (Fukuyama, 1995). What Simon describes is not a rupture with the past so much as an acceleration of changes already found in the modern world.

Modern intimacies have emerged over the past 200 years or so and have become enmeshed in all the features of modernity discussed profusely by social scientists: urbanism, anomie, bureaucratization, commodification, surveillance and individualization. As societies become more and more 'modern', so all these features rapidly multiply. There is a downside and an upside to all this -- a series of traps. On the one hand, intimate relations in modernity become a form of life engaged in a search for authenticity, meaning, freedom. On the other, intimate relations become a form of life increasingly trapped within wider bureaucratizing and commercializing forces: relations become McDonaldized and Disneyfied. They are lodged in contradictory tendencies.

Late-modern (or post-modern) intimacies incorporate the latter stages of the above with newer possibilities grafted on to the old in a high-tech and global world. We are just on the edge of all this, but some of the most telling examples of these newly arriving forms of intimacy might be:

1 Individuation and self-reflexivity. Late-modern intimacies reflect the death of the 'Grand Narrative of the Personal Life', of the 'one true family', of what it really means to be a man or a woman, of the truth of our sexuality, of what the body really is, of the search for identity. Increasingly individuals are cast adrift to decide what kind of men or women they will become, what kind of relationship they will live in, what kind of sexual encounters they will have, what kind of identity they can assume. In part this may be seen as 'the reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991: 5). Although an increase in 'self-consciousness' is common to both modernity and post-modernity, the newer order sees a rapid spiral in such concerns. Both Beck and Giddens have highlighted this fact: for 'the more tradition loses its hold... the more individuals are forced to negotiate life style choices among a diversity of options' (Giddens, 1991: 5). Indeed, 'for the sake of individual survival, individuals are compelled to make themselves the centre of their own life plans and projects' (Beck, 1992: 92). As people are released from the traditional (especially gender) roles prescribed by industrial society and are encouraged more and more 'to build up a life of their own', so all manner of relationships must now be 'worked out, negotiated, arranged and justified in all the details of how, what, why or why not' (Beck and Beck-Gernshein, 1995: 6). Thus a growing characteristic of new style relationships and intimacies is the desire to reflect upon them, and indeed to talk about them with partners. This is a trend towards disclosing intimacies -- 'a process of two or more people mutually sustaining deep knowing and understanding... through talking and listening, sharing thoughts, showing feelings' -- which is starting to permeate more and more relationships (Jammison, 1998: 158). Not only are couples expected to talk more to each other about their innermost desires, but if they do not then this may be taken as a sign that the relationship is not working. A whole panoply of experts -- counsellors, psychiatrists, social workers -- may then be called in to assist.

2 The democratization of personhood and the ethos of pluralization. Closely allied to the above is the arrival of an 'ethos of pluralization' (Connolly, 1995) in which a wider range of possibilities become available. The past was sensed as a singular world, while the post-modern world is one of plurals. Thus whereas the past spoke of men and women, the post-modern speaks of masculinities, femininities and, indeed, genders. Whereas the past spoke of sexuality, now there is a recognition of sexualities. And post-modern families are ones of pluralism and flexibility (representing) a democratic opportunity in which individuals' shared capacities, desires, and convictions could govern the character of their gender, sexual and family relationships (Stacey, 1996: 37). Perhaps over-optimistically, Manuel Castells in his epic account of late-twentieth-century social change, The Information Age, suggests we are moving into a 'post-patriarchal world', one where marriage, family, heterosexuality and sexual desire -- always treated as a unity in the past -- are now becoming increasingly de-linked and separated from each other (Castells, 1997: 434-435).
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235. They are indeed becoming their own autonomous spheres. ‘Sex’, for example, no longer works its prime task of procreation: it now serves a multiplicity of purposes, including both recreational goals and the defining of relationships. It incorporates a much wider range of potential sexual practices. ‘Sex’ becomes autonomous (or in Giddens’s less felicitous term, ‘plastic’). Under pluralization, people’s various characters become more open and democratized.

3 The mediatization of intimacies. A third feature of the late or post-modern landscape is the ways in which patterns of intimacy are increasingly embedded in media relations. This is true not just in the simple sense that most media forms provide endless stories, images and debates over questions of intimacy – from the soap opera tales of sex and family found in Friends, Eastenders or Home and Away, to the talk shows of Jerry Springer or Oprah which flaunt the endless possibilities of the tragic personal life (cf. Gomson, 1998). It is also true in the wider sense that much of our daily talk and conversation is both about and informed by these media. Watching television and talking about it, for instance, may now be a prime activity for families, lovers and friends. The death of a Princess Diana, the sexual antics of a Madonna or Michael Jackson, the seeing of the film Titanic or the Clinton/Lewinsky ‘cigar capers’ disseminated throughout the world on the Web may start to infuse our most intimate talk and relationships in telling ways. I am not suggesting any straightforward or direct impact of the media on our lives – the crude suggestions, for instance, that pornography leads us to commit pornographic acts. Rather, I am suggesting that the very air we breathe in a post-modern world is saturated with simulations from media. Many – and especially new generations – live their intimacies through media.

4 The globalization of intimacies. A fourth feature concerns the processes by which local cultures pick up, and usually transform, global elements of intimacies. There are numerous instances: major new markets in holiday travels, including but not limited to sex tourism; ‘intimate images’ sent around the world through films, television programmes, videos and pop culture; worldwide social movements which debate intimacies – the Women’s Movement and the Lesbian and Gay Movement; and new diseases such as AIDS which involve major international organizations. Not least important are the growing numbers of people who now conduct their actual personal relationships on a global scale. Many partners, for instance, no longer live together in the same country let alone under the same roof.

5 The emergence of post-identity possibilities. Much of the above can also be seen as a radical shift in the ways in which some people now come to see themselves. Kenneth Gergen, for example, depicts a journey from the romantic self via the modern self to the post-modern. For him, the post-modern means ‘the very concept of personal essences is thrown in doubt’ (Gergen, 1991: 7). He argues that the new ‘technologies of social saturation’ (from phones and television to computers and virtual realities) lead to a ‘multiphrenic condition’ whereby new patterns of post-identity relationships (‘fractional’, ‘microwave’, etc.) start to appear. Thus he talks of ‘fractional relationships’ – in families, in sexualities, in daily life – which are more limited in scope, less totalizing than in the past. Nowhere is this clearer than in the emerging new etiquette and relationships which surround electronic mail and web sites (Turkle, 1995).

6 The McDonaldization of intimacy. In stark contrast to many of the images of increasing choice, this feature suggests a major counter-trend. For here our intimacies – far from bringing choice and individuality – become very standardized. It is the image of efficiency, calculability, rationality and predictability applied to the world of relationships (Ritzer, 1996). Thus, sex may become safely commodified into telephone sex, computer dating lines, and masturbatory porno videos; relationships become subject to counsellors and standardized self-help books which suggest twelve steps to the perfect relationship; and families become Disneyfied through consumer goods (babies need their special clothes, chairs, foods, alarms, medications and toiletries from baby-care chain stores, and this sanitized world then continues throughout every stage of life).

GENDERS AND THE SHIFTS IN INTIMACIES

There are many crucial dimensions to these changing characteristics of late-modern intimacies which I have started to depict above, but gender is usually singled out as central. The distinction between modern and post-modern genders may be most salient here. The former inhabit a world where the differences between men and women organized around heterosexuality and the family are clear and striking. A gender war infuses such relationships. The latter inhabit a world where the bipolar dualism of men and women starts to break down, and genders themselves are seen as unstable categories, socially constructed and performed.

Gender wars?

Modern intimacy debates have been lodged in the ‘gender war’ where the worlds of men and women are seen as being distinctively at odds with each other. Classically, problems centre around what Norbert Elias talks of as a ‘lust economy’ (1994: 456–519). Here, the so-called ‘lust balance’ may be seen as an ‘attempt to find a satisfying balance between the longing for sex and the longing for love’ (Wouters, 1998: 229); between the pursuit of transient, passionate, lusty, sexual excitement and the search for a more enduring
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'love' and care. In the modern world, the common perception is that women search for a more emotional, bonding, caring, 'loving' world while men search for a more erotic, sexual, even physical world. This is common sense backed, indeed, by detailed arguments from socio-biology.

This divide is at the heart of much radical feminist criticism of contemporary intimacies which obviously has a much less sanguine view of the changes I have located above. For here sex itself is defined as being male: male sexual power (phallocentrism), orchestrated through the institution of heterosexuality and buttressed by marriage and the family, works to define women's lives. The dark side of intimacies are here foregrounded: domestic violence, pornography, sexual harassment, rape and sexual violence, marital rape, date rape/acquaintance rape, child sexual abuse, stalking, sexual murder (Kelly, 1988; MacKinnon, 1987). The radical response to this power has been to avoid intercourse altogether (Dworkin, 1987) and/or to enter radical lesbianism. It leads to scathing attacks on heterosexual intercourse because this is seen as incapable of offering egalitarian relationships, a view which poses serious problems for heterosexual feminists.

This view is, in turn, also challenged from within feminism by those who argue it sides too easily with the neglect of women's eroticism and desires (Segal, 1994). Throughout much of the second wave of feminism, a recurring divide has been between 'pleasure' and 'danger' feminists, between those who see the desires of women as a key focus for development and those who see such desires as merely perpetuating the dangers derived from male sexualities. Ironically, some more recent arguments, including those of some post-modern and third wave feminists, have suggested a straining towards a greater equality - with some women becoming more and more erotic (what some writers have called the 'feminization of sex') (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, 1986) and some men becoming 'new men': more sensitive, caring, loving. Indeed, the sexualities of women and men do seem to have been changing since the arrival of the women's movement, and 'third wave' feminists have provided confident assertions of women's sexualities and detailed accounts of their own sexualities, as well as their own disagreements with post feminist orthodoxies around such issues as relationship rape (Stan, 1995). At the same time, both masculinity and heterosexuality have been made more and more problematic.

Changing relations?

There may, then, be a shift taking place in the so-called 'lust balance', which is generally experienced as one befitting post-modern times: a time of profound ambiguity, confusion, disarray, uncertainty. Manuel Castells sees these recent changes in intimacy as being closely connected to 'a mass insurrection of women against their oppression throughout the world' (Castells, 1997: 135), and suggests they have been caused by four key changes: in the economy and labour market; in shifts in technology over child bearing; in globalization and the hearing of women's voices all over the world; and in the growth of new social movements. Others see a blurring of the traditional divides between men and women: a 'sexualization of love' along with an 'eroticization of sex' (Seidman, 1992); a move towards 'androgynous love' (Cancian, 1987); and a 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991). Here 'a sexual relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (Giddens, 1991: 58). Ironically, the model for this may well be derived from gay relations where procreation and sexuality have long been divorced from each other. Again, choice and individualism are the key themes and the sense of following traditional blueprints has gone.

There is a clear downside to all this. Intimacy may be in the process of becoming more democratic for some, creating a democracy in the personal sphere to mirror that of the public sphere. But for others it is becoming increasingly antagonistic, with men and women's relationships becoming polarized and separate. Women have started to 'need' men less and less, while men have become more and more absent, distant, irresponsible or coercive. In an increasingly post-modern world where boundaries are less clear and strong narratives of how to live an intimate life have weakened, problems with gender relations may well multiply (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

CULTURE WARS AND INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP: THE DEBATE OVER LIFE POLITICS

The late/post-modernization of intimacies leads to an ongoing moral and political struggle over the kinds of lives people should be leading. While there is little that is new about this debate, these end-of-century, end-of-millennium times may serve as critical moments where moral anxieties run even higher than usual. Showalter's elegant study of Sexual Anarchy suggests direct parallels between late-nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle crises and those of today: from concerns over sexual disease and new women to fears over homosexuality and the crisis of the body. But she is not gloomy about it: 'If we can learn something from the fears and myths of the past, it is that they are so often exaggerated and unreal, that what looks like sexual anarchy in the context of fin-de-siècle anxieties may be the embryonic stirrings of a new order' (Showalter, 1991: 18).

In recent years few could have missed these struggles - and they are global - demanding a return to 'family values' and suggesting we get 'back to basics'. The moral, intimate and personal life has become a truly publicly contested domain. For some we are witnessing 'the de-moralisation of
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society' (Himmelfarb, 1995). This is the time of the 'culture wars' where realignments are taking place in politics over morality and lifestyles, cutting across old divides of religion, class and political party. Briefly, I think several main positions of argument can be detected.

Traditionalizing claims

Much public debate lies in the hands of traditionalists, tribalists, fundamentalists and demodernizers. With varying emphases, these all see chaos around and seek a return to an old order with a clear authority and firm moral structure. The buzzwords include a return to 'family values', to 'community', and to well-disciplined families, schools and streets. Enemies are created such that the world becomes divided into a virtuous, righteous, well-intentioned group of citizens (my tribe) and a vicious, dangerous, immoral corrupting group (often the underclass).

I suggest two key problems with these arguments. First, they usually assert a return to a past world where all was better. But these are worlds we never had, and ways we never ever were. The ravages, short lives, dangers and brutalities of much of history are overlooked for a presumed more idyllic past. But there can indeed be no return to a simple happy past because that past is itself a fiction. Second, even if the past was more rosy than today, we cannot set the clocks back. All the contemporary developments, ranging from urbanization and shifts in media communications to new technologies and the growth of individualistic ideologies, cannot simply be removed. And the post-modernization of intimacies is contingent upon them. The moral changes we are experiencing are all bound up with these wider social and cultural changes, and they cannot be easily separated. As a noted, yet rather conservative, sociologist Peter Berger once put it while discussing the modernization of consciousness:

once established, modern consciousness is rather hard to get rid of. Its definitions of reality and its psychological consequences are dragged along even into the rebellions against it, providing the ironic spectacle of an assault on modernity by people whose consciousness presupposes the same modernity. [There are thus] intrinsic limits to any de-modernising enterprise (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1973: 192).

Since Berger was writing some twenty-five years ago, the changes of the modern world have accelerated greatly. Moral debates hence should in fact focus on how we can live with these changes and not simply decry them by seeking a return to a simple, mythical past. The traditionalists and the tribalists refuse to recognize the changing nature of the social worlds in which we are living. In a world that is radically different from the past, the old solutions cannot simply be drawn upon. Though this is not to say we cannot learn from past ways and mistakes.

Intimate choices

The relativist-individualist response

A second position is equally untenable: the radical individualist response. Here, the rapidity of change is accepted, along with an extreme moral relativism and a sense that anything goes. This position accepts the changes, and then prostrates itself before them. It harbours an anti-sociological view that a society without rules or ethics is indeed possible. It is an anarchist's utopia of a society-less society and I believe it can be dismissed quickly because it so radically flies in the face of how society works. It is a kind of throwback from the late 1960s 'do your own thingism'.

Dialogues, discourses and democratic visions

A third position is the one I favour, and I explore it more fully elsewhere (Plummer, 1995). Drawing from many recent developments in political and post-modern theory, it suggests the need for a new kind of politics (which I call 'Intimate Citizenship') that can accept the move into a new kind of world. Here many voices have to be heard, even voices that oppose each other. Dialogues have to be invented between voices that are radically oppositional to each other: anti-abortionist or 'right to lifers', for instance, need to make limited common ground with pro-abortionists and those favouring 'the right to choose'. The oppositional tensions need to be lived with 'before the shooting begins' (Hunter, 1994). This may be seen as part of both a 'politics of life style' (Giddens, 1991) and the search for a 'post-modern ethics' (Bauman, 1993). These seek – against a backdrop of recognizing ambivalence, contradiction and the 'incurably aporetic' nature of morality (Bauman, 1993: 11) – to develop ethical and moral positions around the question 'how should we live in a post-traditional order?' (Giddens, 1991: 214-15, 231). Both within and outside academic circles, then, the new and changing forms of intimacies have generated heated debates and little consensus. Sometimes these conflicts are mapped on huge stages; at other times only small groups are involved. But everywhere the meanings of intimacies are contested.

There is obviously a strong evaluative element to most of these debates, and there are no easy solutions. What seems required is a position which recognizes the dangers and crises of our changing climate, seeks an open debate about 'values', 'morals' and 'ethics', abandons the search for absolute foundations, aims to provide clarifications of the principles which do inform our choices, acknowledges differences in positions and yet continues to search for areas of common agreement.

The struggle for such a position is increasingly widespread among contemporary theorists of intimacy. Jeffrey Weeks's position is 'radical democratic humanism', and he seeks a common concern with the values of 'care, responsibility, respect and love' (Weeks, 1995: ix). For the Becks, love is likely to become the new religion giving meaning to individual lives while
also providing a sense of togetherness. 'F]free will and mutual consent are its guiding stars' and it 'becomes a radical form of personal responsibility'. Yet 'the actual content of the love package is a subjective mutual invention, and all around it are pitfalls and potential disaster' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 194). Likewise, Steven Seidman disavows any 'universal moral imperative that can guide sexual practice', but at the same time does agree that simple sexual libertarianism will not do. Instead he seeks pragmatic guidelines for a sexual ethic allowing that 'different groups evolve their own sexual culture around which they elaborate coherent lives' (Seidman, 1992: 190-2). Like Weeks, he wants a sexual ethics bound to meanings, contexts, recognition of diversities, respect, the importance of consent, responsibility and the consequences of acts. But there can be no prejudging - he even takes the case of paedophilia to show just how tricky this moral debate must be. Seidman is looking for what he calls a 'pragmatic culture of knowledge' which 'leaves permanently unsettled or unresolved an ongoing social world of interpretative social dispute' (Seidman, 1997: 257–8). This is a world which respects differences. It depends on a culture of deep reflexivity and demands living with a level of ambiguity, uncertainty, contingency, and social fluidity that many of us may find psychologically and sociologically challenging' (Seidman, 1997: 258).

The challenge for the next century is whether we can live in such a world.

SUMMARY

- The contemporary world is simultaneously traditional, modern and late/post-modern, and is characterized by a growing flow of choices for many people around families, bodies, sexualities, identities and reproduction.
- Late-modern intimacies may be linked to individuation, the ethos of pluralization, mediatization, globalization, post-identity possibilities and McDonaldization.
- They bring with them simultaneously potentials for both gender conflicts and a new harmony in gender relations.
- Modern politics is increasingly concerned with these debates, with some making claims for a return to traditional cultures, others seeking a relativist 'do your own thing' and others seeking a 'dialogic, democratic discourse'.
- This latter is the best but the hardest route as it involves talking through differences and seeking out commonalities; of recognizing there is no longer one authority while trying to establish limited sets of authoritative agreements that enable people to move forward in making their choices.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING

Two major studies which establish this debate are:
On the moral and political conflicts, see:
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TRENDS AND MOVEMENTS

Chapter 31

Environmentalism

David Pepper

INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTALISM AND ANTI-ENVIRONMENTALISM

An ‘environmentalist’, says the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is ‘one who is concerned with protection of the environment’. Nowadays most of us in the West are ‘environmentalists’ by this simple definition. We are uneasy about living in what Ulrich Beck (1995) calls ‘a risk society’, i.e. one subjected to risks seemingly beyond our control and potentially far-reaching in magnitude and spatial extent. Many of these risks are environmental, ranging from global warming, post-Chernobyl contamination, harmful food additives, to polluted city air.

Many people will also have heard that technological and economic growth, i.e. ‘development’, which has long been thought desirable and even the measure of ‘progress’, are somehow the culprits producing environmental degradation. Even more unsettling. However, we might have been reassured after 1992’s United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held at Rio de Janeiro. There, world leaders decided that development, economic growth and environmental protection can be compatible – by following a model of development called ‘ecological modernization’ we can have our cake and eat it. So the environmental doomsters of the 1960s and 1970s were perhaps wrong after all.

Although I say that ‘most’ of us today are environmentalists, not everyone falls into this category. A recent wave of anti-environmentalism has emerged (Rowell, 1996). Anti-environmentalists include some on the political Right (e.g. the Global Climate Coalition, supported by multinational oil