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(ECOINT)

# WORKING PAPER

**‘Sleepwalking’ from planetary thinking to the  
end of the international order**

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**Abstract:** This paper revisits the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century internationalism in order to excavate and grasp the long history of 'planetary thinking'. It shows that planetary-scale thinking has been an available and well-used framing since the 1960s for discussing a growing awareness of the incompatibility of industrialised modernity and development and questions of environment. That awareness extended to the idea that the world was 'sleepwalking' its way to planet-scale climate catastrophe. By the later 1970s, however, planetary thinking had made way for the global, and with its connotations of an economically globalized world. Among the questions this paper raises are: How should we understand the appearance and disappearance of this 20<sup>th</sup> century planetary thinking? What were its possibilities and limitations? What does that history of 'interruption' tell us about the long history of 'planetary thinking'? And can this same history help us recalibrate our contemporary thinking about how we write history, and what it's for, in what is now an era of climate emergency?

**Keywords:** planetary; global; internationalism; UN Human Environment Conference; environment; climate change; Barbara Ward; Club of Rome



## **Sleepwalking' from planetary thinking to the end of the international order**

The mood these days is dire. There are warnings that we are 'sleepwalking' our way to planet-scale climate catastrophe — just at the moment in which we are faced with a profound dilemma: on the one hand, the mechanisms that we used to rely on for tackling global collective action problems, such as climate change, the inter-governmental foundations of the existing international order, are losing legitimacy and even breaking up. On the other hand, these mechanisms, with their 20<sup>th</sup> century design, are considered no longer fit for purpose, at least not for generating the kinds of radical solutions required to tackle the nearing climate catastrophe. We cannot do without them, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century inter-governmental foundations of the existing international order are insufficient for waking and shaking us up. Even so, as I argue here, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century internationalism is worth revisiting for what it tells us about the long history of 'planetary thinking' as the basis for recalibrating our contemporary thinking.

### **The planetary in the international**

Today, 100 years since the Treaty of Versailles was set up by the victors of World War I to prevent a repetition of what had happened in 1914, when Europeans 'sleepwalked' their way into war, by building a new system of international/intergovernmental organizations, we have an increasingly clear picture of a century during which the public and political fortunes of 'international thinking' rose and fell, depending on whether it was perceived as an antidote to nationalism and war, or an actual threat to national sovereignty. The status of this newly conceived international order—based on international institutions and, simultaneously, the principle of nationality—peaked in moments of despair, in the midst of the most terrible wars. It flourished in the relatively brief moments of opportunity at the end of these wars, with the promise of peace-making. Importantly, it reflected the demands of popular movements as much as politicians. While the history of international thinking is widely captured, one aspect of it has attracted less attention, and yet it is this aspect that can help us today: exactly fifty years ago, in the midst of the Cold War, 'international thinking' led to an even more ambitious idea, 'planetary thinking', in anticipation of an environmental crisis that would pose an even greater existential crisis for humankind.

In 1969, the UN Secretary-General U Thant called for a *planetary imagination* that could match 'the realities of the present-day world.' At that time, those realities included the technological abilities that put humans on the moon, and the world-scale environmental concerns that provoked the UN General Assembly to organize the world's first international conference on the environment. Eventually held in Stockholm in 1972, the UN Human Environment Conference brought together around 113 governments and 700 NGO accredited observers as well as a broader public. It even included an official forum that gave voice to non-governmental environmental organizations. As many of our contemporary world of nation-states and nationally-defined populations only reluctantly and belatedly come to practical terms with a world-scale climate emergency, it is worth looking back to this same international past, for what it can tell us about the long history of international engagement with the challenges of the environment, and climate change in particular. The history of the Stockholm conference presents us with a disorienting picture

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of the long notice we have had of a looming, fossil-fuel fuelled environmental crisis of *planetary* proportions, and an international order already grappling with that same crisis by adopting a 'planetary' perspective.



First views of earth from the moon, 1966



Blue Marble, 1972



Historians have long argued that expanding technologies and networks of communication that built up from the mid-sixties inspired an unprecedented 'global consciousness'. The possibility of viewing the earth from outer-space—whether through the mid-1960s black and white photographs taken by Lunar Orbiter satellites or the technicolor of the early 1970s Blue Marble imagery—radically altered the ways we imagined the earth as a 'globe'. The global consciousness of this era was not simply a question of looking from the outside in. It seemed to reflect the actual interdependence of the world's nation-states, whether through the mobility of trade or labour, or migration, and, increasingly, flows of money. It underscored the importance of the *global* nature of the international order, and the institutions, norms and laws—adding up to a global vision of international governance. What is now forgotten was the coinciding emphasis on the *planetary* which stressed the significance of the environment to the political, social and economic questions already defining the international order. What in hindsight looks like the brief, and interrupted, rise of this planetary perspective was a product of a growing environmental consciousness, and a creeping awareness of the advancing perils of climate change.

The 1972 UN Stockholm Human Environment Conference is in part the history of how environmental challenges provoked the reimagination of an international order as a planetary order. Central to that story were the individuals involved in organizing the conference, most prominently the English-born economist Barbara Ward, the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Economic Development at Columbia University.<sup>1</sup> In *Spaceship Earth*, published in 1966, Ward connected planetary imagery to questions about social justice and what she called 'The Balance of Wealth'. At the same time, she also used her networks and speech-writing to spread these ideas. This included a well-known speech by Adlai Stevenson II, US Ambassador to the UN, delivered in 1965 at UNESCO in which he spoke confidently of a 'world society', 'the planet earth and nature, along with man and his works upon the planet'. Ward's networks, and her reputation as someone who tackled the intersections of environmental and economic issues, made her the person the UN turned to help prepare for Stockholm. She was specifically tasked with drafting a text that would provide 'a conceptual framework for participants' at the conference, 'and the general public as well'. This became the book *Only One Earth*.

In Ward's draft, *Only One Earth* addressed a planetary order crucial to meet transborder challenges in the 'last remaining areas [of] the seamless web of air and water ...'. She called for more international governance, and cited the realism of international responses built on already existing transnational responses such as NATO's air pollution research, the OECD, and European Economic Community's environmental policies.<sup>2</sup> It was Ward's influence that made *Only One Earth* focus on the need to develop alternative sources of energy to replace the 'nursery phase' of fossil fuels, and reduce CO<sub>2</sub>—electric cars were already on the horizon as one tool. Drawing on available statistics on carbon emissions, she made a prediction for levels of global warming by the still far-away year 2000. Tested against IPCC figures, Ward, it turns out, was correct.



*'We may begin with humble coal and common sludge. We may end with the future of humanity'. Only One Earth*

05 June 1972 Stockholm, Sweden - UN PHOTO ARCHIVE

Ward linked economic and environmental themes, hinting already at the importance that innovative economic policies had in enabling a planetary imagination. She canvassed the price of pollution and 'diseconomy' of the treatment of air and water as 'free goods'.

Episodes of water contamination, the effect of pesticides in the food chain, amongst other 'bads', demanded debate about 'the calculus of who shall pay' the costs in health care and quality of life of practices that poisoned the environment. She supported an international tax system, as well as 'world insurance system' to clean up messes in poor cities; and the need for an international authority for disaster operations. Crucially, she advanced a critique of the 'irrational confidence in permanent economic growth, the belief in unlimited physical resources'. Her favorite word was 'interdependence', a concept Ward believed captured the facts of a shared biosphere, and a planetary economy, in which no nations in the world were outside the network of trade and investment. She ended by emphasizing the importance of making 'the planet ... a centre of rational loyalty for all mankind.' At the Stockholm conference, these planetary themes were also struck by the elderly anthropologist Margaret Mead, as spokesperson for the NGO Forum at the Stockholm meeting. Mead's emphasis was on the danger posed to 'our planet' by 'the way in which we use our technology, the way we produce energy, the way in which we treat the land, exhaust the resources and abuse and deprive half of the planet's population... Beside the picture of danger and the picture of injustice, we must place a picture of what is now possible, as it has never been before, for man to become.'

None of these examples of planetary thinking fifty years ago help us understand why its importance was so quickly abandoned or forgotten. Ironically, one answer lies in the multiple legacies of that same moment and event.

On the one hand the UN Human Environment conference gave legitimacy to almost a decade of planetary thinking —whether as planetary realism or planetary imagination. It sought environmental action against the transnational sources and impact of environmental problems, including growing awareness of climate change, by recourse to coordinated intergovernmental action. It fundamentally relied on the international foundations of the international order, including the invention of new international programs such as the United Nations Environmental Program, based in Nairobi. Just as some of the Stockholm discussions stressed a vision of the order that acknowledged the earth's fragility, the conference briefly manifested a popular as well as scientific and governmental engagement with these issues. It inspired economic solutions grounded in these equity questions, with an eye to social justice across the planet as well as within nation-states. Mead and Ward captured this mood as they promoted the Stockholm conference as the 'starting point for a new sense of planetary realism--beyond our narrow nationalisms, our divisive ideologies, our gulfs of wealth and poverty.' They wanted this planetary realism to acknowledge 'all human life, black white, communist, capitalist, wealthy, ... depends for sheer survival on the health, fertility and balance of the earth's life support system, on the oceans, air, and climates, on the soils and harvests which we all have to share and which we can irretrievably damage. This is the ultimate rationale for world cooperation.'

On the other hand, there were other voices and interests at the UN conference that were witness to a different economic strand of this planetary thinking. This was articulated by a 'businessman', Aurelio Peccei, founder of the Club of Rome (1968). In one of the speeches to the 'Who speaks for the Earth?' lecture series that opened that conference, and also organized by Ward, Peccei spoke about man's responsibility as the 'governor of 'Spaceship Earth' - which is at present drifting along dangerously'. He emphasised 'self-restraint and self-discipline', the prevention the overexploitation of nature, 'or what is left of it'. He even brokered that 'individual initiative and profit must become subordinate.' But Peccei's own investment was in the privatisation of development projects, including the establishment of the first '*truly multinational*' organization—a private development bank that invested in Latin America, to help developing parts of the world catch up with the already industrialized.

As the debate about the planet's future was going in the direction of 'no growth', Peccei was able to exercise his influence to make the case for 'sustainable growth'. Backing him was a book that competed with *Only One Earth*, that he had worked to fund, the incredibly popular *Limits of Growth* (1972). Using new-fangled computer-generated 'world- modeling', it presented realism as a question of the transnational nodes of commerce and production that added up to the 'new interdependencies' of globalization. *Limits* focused inwards, on the threat which it reckoned as a problem of the South: 'the apocalypse of 6 to 7 billion people crowding the globe by the year 2000 and all aspiring to the same quality of life as the developed world.'

It is here in the same 1970s moment that produced the Stockholm environment conference, that we see another approach to the global as globalization, with an emphasis on the rise

of multinational companies, and the marketisation of the world's economies. The planetary view *preceded* a global perspective in the changing awareness of the world around us, and our connections to it. But the importance and the relevance of the planetary was all but wiped out by interest in the global as a paradigm that referred to industry, commerce, and trade, the rise of multinationals, and the transnational, and the cross-border flows of money. Felicity Scott has gone so far as to describe the global as 'a biopolitical paradigm that extended certain states' interests in regulating the health and productivity of populations and in managing their natural resources and milieu into an expanded, worldwide domain'.<sup>3</sup> At the crossroads of international, planetary, and global thinking sat the fundamental reconceptualization of capitalism that we now think of as neo-liberalism, with its privileging of markets, and the reconfiguring the international, planetary and global as more simply, and reductively, globalization.

If there is one thing historians are useful for, it is anchoring the present, providing moorings that allow us to take stock, to navigate the future with a sense of where we have been and how we got to where we are. Looking back, the adjective planetary takes us from images of the earth, to new ways of conceptualising the earth and the 'global' that eventually end up as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. These days climate change has transformed into a climate emergency, and the challenges we face are a question of imagination as much as policy. We have invented new words such as 'anthropocene' to designate the current geological age as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. But it may also be time to remember the long, interrupted history of 'planetary thinking' and to remember just how long we have known about climate change, and had at our fingertips a range of solutions, many of which we continue to resist. What would Ward make of the irrational fear of electric cars half a century after she imagined their utility?

During the centenary of 1919, scholars like myself advocated (once again) 'planetary thinking'. Faced with the mutually-reinforcing world-scale threats of a climate emergency and the breakdown of an international order invested in the multilateralism of intergovernmental institutions and law, it is timely to return to the longer history of international engagement with environmental challenges, and the possibilities of 'planetary thinking'. This paper is part of a larger project on 'Climate and Capital' that is committed to elaborating that history, and the importance of remembering the past in outlining the future. Was Barbara Ward right to claim in *Only One Earth*, 'we are not sleepwalkers'? Nearly half a century later, we have yet to see.

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1 Born in 1914, Ward was a graduate of a combination of British, French and German schooling, convents and Oxbridge. By the time she became involved in Stockholm, she had worked as assistant editor of the *Economist* [1940-1950], and completed a decade as visiting scholar at Harvard, [1958-1968], she had been governor of the BBC, an advisor to the Pope on problems of peace and development (she was a devout Catholic); later she would add to her cv, along with a series of books, a place on the Canadian board of Governors for the International Development Research Centre, the President of the Conservation Society in 1973, and Director of the International Institute for the Environment and Development. She had a connection to Australia by virtue of her marriage to the important figure in the reform of international organizations in this period, the Australian Robert Jackson.

2 Ward, *Only One Earth*, pp. 293, 202-3; 212.

