

**The Integrated Protestant Ethic and  
the Spirit of Environmentalism**

by

**Sherrie Steiner-Aeschliman**

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**THE INTEGRATED PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE  
SPIRIT OF ENVIRONMENTALISM**

By

**SHERRIE STEINER-AESCHLIMAN**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

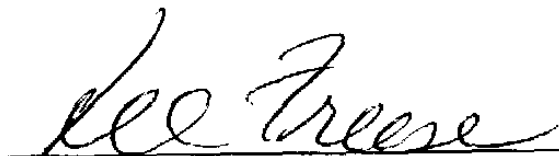
**WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY**  
Department of Sociology

May 1998

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of  
SHERRIE STEINER-AESCHLIMAN find it satisfactory and recommend that it be  
accepted.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Lee Freese", written above a horizontal line.

Chair

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jan E. Stuts", written above a horizontal line.A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "A. L. Mansel", written above a horizontal line.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Given the numerous thoughts expressed in my dissertation, one would expect that I became more opinionated as my theory developed. But such is not the case. There is an untold story behind this work of how an intellectual artist helped me find my mind. In the course of this process, I am coming to understand how much I do *not* know. This artist is Lee Freese, and I am deeply grateful for all he has given. I know working with me has not been exactly easy, but maybe there is pleasure to be found in who I am becoming as a consequence of his mentorship.

I would like to thank Dr. Armand Mauss and Dr. Jan Stets as well who have spent numerous hours working through lengthy documents, arguing for the clarification of ideas. You have taught me how to use reason to communicate across very different belief systems, and I hope I will continue to learn these lessons well.

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It is hard to express my gratitude to my dear husband, Gordon. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. And I fought him for believing I could do more--be more--than I thought possible. Gordon, if I believe in the art of the possible, you believe in the art of the impossible, and, in our togetherness, we redefine the bounds of hope. And how I long for hope. What we share is rather rare, I suspect. I know that it is precious. Thank you.

THE INTEGRATED PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF  
ENVIRONMENTALISM

Abstract

by Sherrie Steiner-Aeschliman, Ph.D.  
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May 1998

Chair: Lee Freese

The theory and data of environmental science suggest that growth in rates of population, consumption and environmental degradation, as a result of the activities of industrialized societies, has created an ecological crisis to which modern societies must adapt. However, adaptation is problematic.

Max Weber studied adaptive social change during the industrial revolution. The evolution of this new way of life was initially problematic because individuals who established industrialism were socialized under feudalism. In this dissertation, I consider *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a theoretical treatise framed by modern human ecology in order to study social change in the context of the ecological crisis of industrialism.

*The Protestant Ethic* is known for describing how religious ideas influenced the unfolding of modern capitalism in the West. However, there is nothing inherent in Protestantism that requires linkage to industrialism. I argue that Protestantism has evolved, and that it need not necessarily promote environmental exploitation, although under industrialism it has. I identify a "green" subculture within Protestantism, and consider how Protestantism's weakness may also be its strength. The very sociological structure that, in the *absence* of ecologically realistic norms, permits widespread ecosystem degradation by industrial capitalism may also *generate* ecologically realistic norms for a natural capitalism.

Weber contended that rationality was problematic because it paradoxically results in a dual crisis of management and meaning where human agency becomes "imprisoned"

as if in an "iron cage." The irrational continuation of environmentally degrading social practices eventually contributes to a legitimation crisis. People turn to religion as an alternative authority. If science and religion converge on environmental values, they might catalyze social change, unless they are too distorted by ideological bias. Adaptive social change only occurs if ethical and ecological values are in accordance with the sustainability of ecosystems. Hence, to adapt to the ecological crisis, sociocultural systems require socialization into ecological realism, because ecologically rational societies may still be maladaptively organized around environmentally unsustainable trajectories.

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DEDICATION

In honorable memory of

*Anita Marie*

Who taught me to love my way through life.





## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Whispering world, a sigh of sighs, the ebb and the flow of the ocean tides,  
One breath, one word, may end or may start a hope in a place of the lover's heart.  
Hope has a place in a lover's heart.*

*Enya, The Memory of Trees*

Many believe that humanity faces a serious ecological<sup>1</sup> crisis due to excess population and consumption. Since the industrial revolution began, population, energy consumption and environmental problems have increased at unprecedented rates. World population took only 37 years to double from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 5 billion in 1987 (Repetto, 1991:3), and exponential population growth is expected to continue in the immediate future (Lutz, 1994). Similarly, world energy usage has increased at exponential rates in tandem with industrialization (Houghton, 1994:151). Environmental problems have also continued to proliferate. In terms of toxic waste alone, American companies reported in 1989 that they had released 5.7 billion pounds of 325 toxic substances (Szasz, 1994:110). For the first time in history, ecosystem disorganization due to human impact is observable throughout the biosphere (e.g., Lubchenco, et al., 1991; Turner, et al., 1990). Humans face the possibility of causing irreversible ecosystem change potentially undermining the necessary conditions for human existence (Catton, 1980; Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 1990; Freese, 1997b; Hardin, 1993; Harrison, 1994).

Although our scholarly understanding of the ecological crisis is necessarily socially constructed, many contend and I assume that it reflects a real material condition.<sup>2</sup> The point can be put this way:

...changing biophysical environmental conditions change the conditions of human society, and the changing conditions of human society in turn change them, in objective and measurable ways quite apart from our subjective interpretations, definitions, perceptions, conceptual understandings, world views, wisdom or ignorance of it all. I can, after all, die from lead poisoning even if I have no concepts of lead, poisoning, or death...If dogma insists that humans' symbolic

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term ecological rather than environmental in the scientific (rather than political) sense of the term. Population and consumption growth are exerting tremendous pressures on Earth's ecological systems. According to *The Sustainable Biosphere Initiative* (Lubchenco, et al, 1991), many of the environmental problems that challenge human society are fundamentally ecological in nature (e.g., biospheric changes in climate, in atmospheric, soil and water chemistry--including pollutants, and in land- and water-use patterns, natural and anthropogenic changes in patterns of genetic, species and habitat diversity, etc.).

<sup>2</sup>On the social constructionist interpretation, no social condition, however deplorable or intolerable it may seem to social scientists or social critics, is inherently problematic; "[i]t is made a problem by the entrepreneurship of various interest groups, which succeed in winning over important segments of public opinion to the support of a social movement aimed at changing that condition" (Mauss, 1975:xvi).

meanings are primary and material biophysical conditions are secondary and useful only as raw input around which cultural meanings can be constructed, then theoretical frameworks based on the received dogmas can tell us about cultural definitions of human-environmental connections--but not about human-environmental connections (Freese, 1997b:21-22).

However, to assume that material conditions are real should not be construed to mean there is a simple causal relationship between material conditions and sociocultural change. Studies of social movements have empirically documented that no direct causal relationship exists between material grievances and social movements as harbingers of social change (e.g., Mauss, 1989). Indeed, much human ecology theory would posit that a linear causal relationship does not exist between material grievances and sociocultural change; rather, the relationship is nonlinear, multidimensional and complex.

It will be argued that ecological constraints are severe, and current rates of growth may be unsustainable. However, despite the constraints, some limited human adaptability is possible through reorganization (e.g., Harrison, 1994; McCay, 1995; Norgaard, 1994). Indeed, the hope of the future depends, in part, upon our ability to reorganize ourselves both socially and psychologically.<sup>3</sup>

Although some limited human adaptability is possible through reorganization, it would be fallacious to assume that the adaptive reorganizational process is unproblematic. Recently, some scholars have been considering ways in which the natural world shapes ideas, broadly, as with paradigmatic shifts (e.g., Catton & Dunlap, 1980; Murphy, 1994) and more narrowly, as with the specific field of religious ethics (Snarey, 1996). Implicit in some of these writings is the assumption that humans will adaptively reorganize if they undergo a paradigm shift. However, from a human ecology perspective, this assumption is unwarranted. Several civilizations have disappeared over the course of history rather than adaptively reorganize when the environment became irreversibly disorganized (see Ponting, 1991).

The process of human reorganization in response to ecological crises is problematic for several reasons. For one, social psychologists know that the relationship

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<sup>3</sup>The focus of this work is on increasing our ability to do what can be done given the real constraints in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, who once said, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the strength to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Lynn White (of the Lynn White thesis) proposed that St. Francis become the patron saint for ecologists (White, 1967).

between ideas and behavior is problematic, at best (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1973; Ajzen, 1988). For another, sociologists know that rational-legal organizations create timid leaders (Perrow, 1972), and Weber and Michels theorized about the "iron chains" of rationalized societies (Weber, 1978 [1922]; Michels, 1993). Hope for a governmental solution to the ecological crisis must recognize that capitalism<sup>4</sup> produces the tax base which funds the political system; and, capitalism, as an organizational system, creates environmental degradation (O'Connor, 1991; Schnaiberg, 1980). And we know that social movements, democratic or not, do not occur spontaneously in response to grievances (Mauss, 1989); they must be socially constructed by entrepreneurs, and organized and funded in the context of political opportunity structures (McCarthy & Zald, 1982). Even then, social movements are only somewhat successful in effectively bringing about social change (e.g., Frey, Dietz, & Kalof, 1992; Gamson, 1975). Effective reorganization to avert irreversible ecosystem disorganization will require major efforts on the part of large numbers of concerned people. According to Brulle (and many other scholars), "[t]he development of an ecologically sustainable society is one of the major challenges our social institutions must accomplish" (Brulle, 1995:1). *Accomplish* is a key word because the relationship between human agency and social structure is problematic. Thus, adaptive human reorganization is problematic.

One of sociology's founding fathers, Max Weber, studied processes that enabled humans to respond adaptively in the context of the last major change in the interaction of sociocultural and biophysical systems: the industrial revolution. Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has been long recognized as a classic text, and debate regarding Weber's treatise continues to this day (e.g., Kalberg, 1996; Lehmann & Roth, 1993; MacKinnon, 1993). However, *The Protestant Ethic* has been largely debated regarding Weber's analysis of the origins of the modern economic ethos of

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<sup>4</sup>Industrialized societies, of which capitalism is but one form, cause environmental degradation. Indeed, even certain pre-industrial societies (e.g., horticultural, agrarian) caused a certain amount of disorganization in ecosystems. Much of what I say with specific reference to capitalism may be true of mercantilism and socialism, as well. For theoretical reasons, I am focusing specifically upon capitalism in this project.

capitalism and the manner in which ideas influenced the unfolding of modern capitalism in the West. What has been largely overlooked is Weber's theoretical contributions:<sup>5</sup>

Written by one of the discipline's major founding theorists, this classic must be comprehended as well in terms of its many theoretical contributions to sociology. *The Protestant Ethic* addresses, for example, the relationships between history and sociology, tradition and social change, economic interests and cultural forces, capitalism and values, micro and macro levels of analysis, past and present, and individual action and social groupings. Curiously, although all of these familiar themes stand at the foundation of central controversies in postwar American sociology, *The Protestant Ethic* has scarcely influenced these debates (Kalberg, 1996:49).

Although Weber's classic text has been available to scholars for over seventy years, many of Weber's theoretical contributions have remained untapped largely because of a methodological barrier: Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* is a *case study* and, as such, is not amenable to generalizability nor determination of causality. This aspect of Weber's methodology will be discussed in chapter two; in the meantime, suffice it to say, even though Weber's text has been with sociologists for a long time, the text contains important insights that have heretofore been overlooked--theoretical insights which are relevant to current questions regarding the ecological crisis.

In this dissertation, I consider Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* as a theoretical treatise in the context of a modern, interdisciplinary human ecology framework. I reinterpret *The Protestant Ethic* as describing a societal transformation that illustrates the process of biosociocultural reorganization. But what is biosociocultural reorganization and how does it occur?

Freese (1997a) postulates a human ecological model of biosociocultural evolution as a complex, spontaneously reorganizing process where social systems develop in relation to ecosystemic foundations. Biosociocultural reorganization is ultimately driven by the maximization of efficient total energy flux through a system within the energy constraints imposed by the second law of thermodynamics. The process begins with human energy expropriation from ecosystems. Human organization is built with the energy that is expropriated from ecosystems. As sociocultural systems develop and

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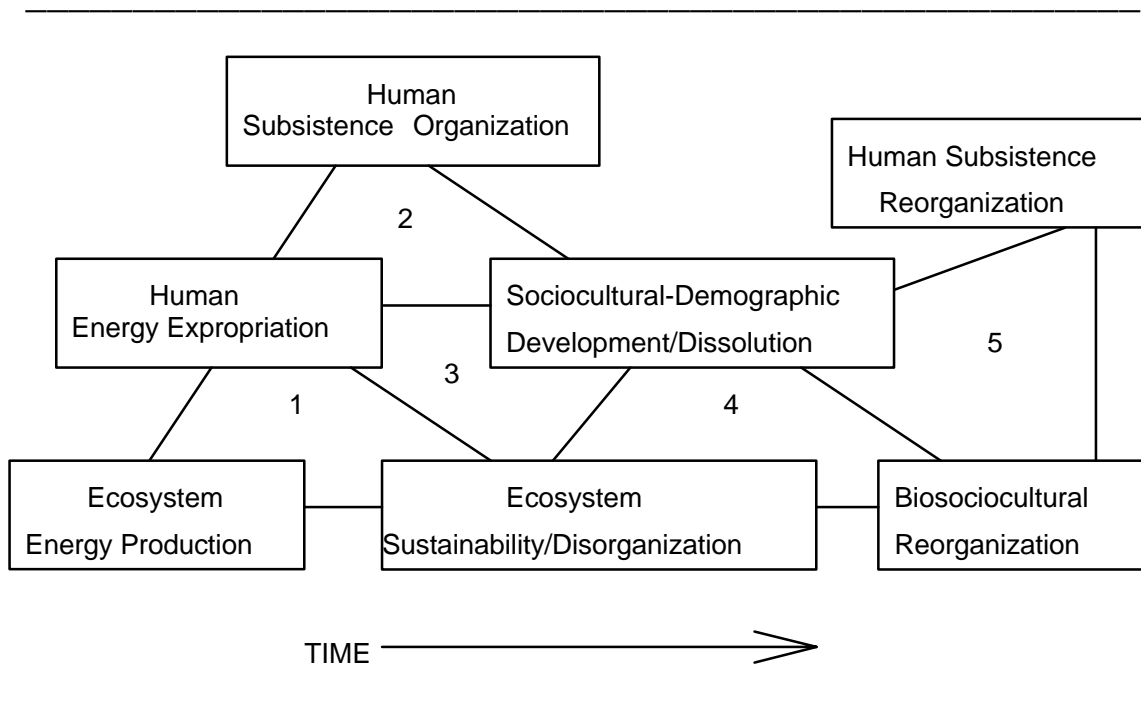
<sup>5</sup>A few theorists did infrequently acknowledge Weber's theoretical contributions in the 1940's, but their voices remained "unheard" and "alternative" within the wider discipline of sociology (Kalberg, 1996). Some of these theorists are Fischhoff, 1944; Gerth, 1946; and Salomon, 1934, 1935a, 1935b, 1945.

populations grow, the source ecosystem may eventually become disorganized, triggering an interactive process of biosociocultural reorganization wherein human subsistence gets reorganized. What we see here is a model where sociocultural and biological evolution are *interdependent* (rather than parallel) evolutionary processes, *hierarchically related* processes (in that social systems have ecosystemic foundations), and *complex, nonlinear, spontaneously reorganizing* processes. Over human history, technological advances have increased the amount of ecosystem energy expropriation, creating dynamic biosociocultural evolution, and enabling the cultural displacement of preindustrialized societies by industrialized societies who obtain an energetic competitive advantage.

The industrial revolution in Europe (1760-1830) is an example of sociocultural development within a biosociocultural reorganizing process; the series of changes spoken of as "The Industrial Revolution" were not merely industrial, but also social, intellectual, demographic and ecological (e.g., Ashton, 1948:1-17; Olsen, 1991: 179-200; 223-257). To understand industrial development, we must begin by considering the context from which it emerged.

The process began in a context that utilized a biologically-based energy system of human energy expropriation (see triadic process #1 in Figure 1.1). In many cases, this type of energy system does not enable the development of surplus wealth and societies remain as hunter-gatherers without the development of human subsistence organization. However, in preindustrial Europe, humans intensified their ability to extract energy from ecosystems with the development of agriculture. The excess food supply facilitated the development of human subsistence organization in the form of agricultural societies (see triadic process #2 in Figure 1.1). In Europe, some of the surplus wealth was used to develop new technologies.

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**A TRIADIC PROCESS ASSEMBLY MODEL FOR**  
**BIOSOCIOCULTURAL EVOLUTION**



Source: Freese (1997a)

The industrial revolution began when these new technologies were systematically used to increase the amount of energy expropriated from ecosystems (Olsen, 1991:251). Specifically, industrialization occurred as this extracted energy was converted to surplus wealth for the purposes of building human organization. Mechanical power became applied to all forms of economic production, greatly expanding the ability of a society to manufacture all kinds of goods efficiently, abundantly and relatively inexpensively (Olsen, 1991:189). As this process continued, a critical threshold was passed and a new energy system was created as portrayed in triadic process #3 in Figure 1.1 (Debeir, Deleage, and Hemery, 1986). Human subsistence organization changed with this new energy system as technological industrialization and agricultural advances increased food productivity, and public health measures drastically reduced mortality rates. The population grew exponentially and redistributed to urban centers. Commercial trade expanded and modern nation-states were created with the accumulated surplus wealth.

Descriptions of the industrial revolution suggest widespread bioregional ecosystem change as population levels dramatically increased, people migrated to centers of industry, and industrialization proceeded at a rapid pace (e.g., Ashton, 1948). Consider the ecological implications of the following description of industrialization:

There was an increase in the acreage of land under cultivation. Much attention was given to the draining of fens and marshes, to the breaking up and turning to arable of the old, rough, common pastures (which were usually spoken of as the waste), and to the hedging of land, so as to make it more productive of both crops and livestock...Several new crops were introduced...The lines of the moving frontier can be discerned on the hillsides to-day by those with eyes to see (Ashton, 1948:7).

This interrelated process of ecosystem change in relation to population explosion and technological innovation may also be interpreted within triadic process #3 of Figure 1.1. As these new dynamics continue to facilitate increased human energy expropriation from ecosystems, human population and sociocultural development proceed at historically unprecedented rates.

Rapid population growth and urban migration represent sociocultural/demographic development which can bear upon ecosystem sustainability. As industrial sociocultural development increasingly impacts ecosystems, a critical threshold may be passed such that environmental-societal relations begin to operate according to different dynamics (see triadic process #4, Figure 1.1). Industrialization can change the conditions of sustainability. With biologically-based energy systems, sociocultural-demographic dissolution occurred in tandem with energy limitations (triadic process #3). With industrial energy systems, once a critical threshold has been passed, it is the *ecosystem* which disorganizes in tandem with energy limitations (triadic process #4). Human induced environmental degradation may accumulate at historically unprecedented rates. Sociocultural systems now develop at the expense of ecosystem disorganization. As a critical threshold is passed, a biosociocultural reorganization of societal-environmental connections is set in motion (triadic process #5). Gradually, a *qualitatively new form* of sociocultural organization can emerge from this process.

The emergence of industrialized society can be interpreted this way. Human subsistence reorganization (the emergence of industrialized societal organizations)

emerged as a product of the dynamics of biosociocultural reorganization. Industrial organizations were qualitatively different from preindustrial societal forms. In comparison to foraging, horticultural and agrarian societies, industrial societies extracted significantly more energy from ecosystems, which expanded human sociocultural carrying capacities, and the amount of energy that was efficiently captured enabled population, sociocultural development and surplus wealth to significantly increase. It represented a changed social relationship to environmental systems.

But industrial societal-environmental relations, as they exist today, cannot be sustained. In this dissertation, I will argue, in accordance with the Freese model, that sociocultural systems are hierarchically dependent upon viable ecosystems. There comes a point in industrial development when, in response to accumulating environmental disorganization, a critical threshold is passed and, once again, societal-environmental relations begin to reorganize. As ecosystems increasingly disorganize, their carrying capacities begin to shrink and industrial development produces diminishing returns. Furthermore, I will argue that as ecosystems continue to disorganize in tandem with unsustainable extraction of energy from ecosystems, a critical threshold may be passed where sociocultural-demographic *dissolution* may occur and industrial energy systems collapse.

Alternatively, if development begins to occur in accordance with ecosystem *sustainability*, then effective adaptation can occur. If sociocultural development moves from environmentally unsustainable to sustainable trajectories, postindustrial sustainable energy systems may come to replace unsustainable industrial energy systems. If this happens, reorganization will have occurred in which social institutions reflect an ecologically realistic post-industrial society. This would amount to the evolution of a new type of society that is without historical precedent. In order for this to occur, individuals would need to adopt a whole new way of life.

According to Weber, the evolution of a whole new way of life that is without historical precedent was initially problematic because the individuals who established industrial capitalistic organizations were socialized under feudal society. How, then, did capitalism emerge? How was it that individuals, who were socialized under one form of



society, became resocialized to adopt a work ethic correspondent with the emergence of industrial capitalism? And, are there principles that operated in the industrial revolution which might lend insight into realizing an ecologically realistic society under modern conditions of shrinking environmental carrying capacities?

*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* describes this resocialization and societal transformation. Specifically, Weber described a particular religious psychology which enabled individuals to overcome the force of habit to embrace a calling of work--the work ethic. This socialization and resocialization process occurred in tandem with sociocultural development, thus making possible the emergence of a whole new way of life. In this dissertation, I apply Weber's theory to modern conditions and extend his work by considering how the current change is unique.

*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958) is known for describing the manner in which religious ideas influenced the unfolding of modern capitalism in the West. However, there is nothing inherent in Protestantism that requires linkage to capitalism *per se*, and Lenski (1961) theorized that Protestantism historically evolves. I will argue that it has. In addition, both capitalism and the Protestant Ethic have been criticized for promoting environmental damage and exploitation (e.g., Schnaiberg, 1975; White, 1967).

I will argue that Protestantism does not inherently or necessarily *promote* environmental degradation and exploitation (e.g., Schnaiberg, 1975; White, 1967), although in its form under industrial capitalism, in fact, it has. However, even with the existence of opposition to environmental values within Protestant groups (e.g., Kanagy & Nelson, 1995), the Protestant Ethic *per se* need not undermine the basis for an elective affinity<sup>6</sup> between an evolved Protestantism and Environmentalism. There now exists a "green" stream of Protestant thought within the Protestant tradition, and elective affinity rests upon *the material context* of biosociocultural evolution rather than upon the

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<sup>6</sup>Weber never defined the term elective affinity. According to Roth, "[t]he term stems from alchemy and 'the science of divorce' (*Scheidekunst*, an old name for chemistry) and denotes the 'magical' dissolution and recombination of elements in terms of their 'attractiveness'" (1993:10).