10 The Political Nature of Things: David Suzuki and Narratives of Change

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Dr. David Suzuki is one of Canada's most important – if not *the* most important – public intellectuals. Bestselling author of more than forty books, recipient of twenty-two honorary doctorates (in addition to his own PhD in Zoology from the University of Chicago), and ranked fifth in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) 2004 "The Greatest Canadian" series (he was the highest-ranked living individual), he is a familiar enough figure to Canadians to require no introduction in his appearances in a series of humourous powerWise energy-conservation TV ads in 2009. For four decades, Suzuki has relentlessly forced our attention on an issue that has only recently come to be an inescapable part of social and political debate: the present state of the environment and the necessity for us to address it *now* in order to offset a whole range of collective problems in our (near) future.[1] Through his activities on numerous fronts – from his work as a media personality and popular broadcaster to the multiple activities of the David Suzuki Foundation (incorporated in 1990) – he has endeavoured to do what public intellectuals are, traditionally, meant to do: use critique, analysis, and public discourse to generate social change that they see as essential to our collective well-being.

I want to engage here with some of Suzuki's most recent activity as a public intellectual in order to consider his specific approach to and understanding of the nature of the political pedagogy and activism enacted by figures such as him. In focussing on the figure of the public intellectual, I engage the larger concerns of this volume by also raising broader and more general questions about intellectual activity in relation to the public today. I want to look in particular at Suzuki's second autobiography, *David Suzuki: An Autobiography* (2006) and what

he claims will be his final book, *The Legacy: An Elder's Vision for Our Sustainable Future* (2010). These two books represent a small fraction of Suzuki's activity as an intellectual over a long career that has seen him engage the public in multiple ways: as a newspaper columnist (for the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*); the host and originator of a long-running radio program (CBC's weekly science program *Quirks and Quarks*, started in 1975); and host since 1979 of the celebrated (and globally disseminated) television program, *The Nature of Things*. Nevertheless, in these two career-capping books, one can find in condensed form Suzuki's ongoing reflections on the activities of the public intellectual and the approaches, pathways, and mechanisms that one might use in order to help animate significant social and political change.

The history of Suzuki's public impact and reception has been ambivalent. On one hand, as evidenced by his own popularity and the seriousness with which his claims and criticisms continue to be treated by the public and politicians alike, Suzuki has been a stunningly successful public intellectual. He is considered to be one of the globe's most important environmental voices – a vocal presence whose own career as a research scientist lends his claims and arguments especial force and gravitas. On the other hand, Suzuki's activities as a public intellectual have to be counted as a failure. Though there is no doubt that his involvement in the environmental movement has played a significant role in shaping the way in which publics view the environment – the environmental movement in Canada in particular would not be the same without him – the extent of real action on the part of either governments or individuals in the face of an impending, unprecedented, and systemic ecological calamity has been minimal, and has proven in recent years to be *regressive* rather than forward looking. At the time of writing, the current Canadian government's stated intentions towards greenhouse gas reduction is meeker than it was under (for instance) the governments of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien or Paul Martin; the fact that it is not formalized in policy but is merely a stated intention suggests that even these relatively modest goals are unlikely to be met.[2] What is true of Canada is also true of the rest of the world in the wake of the 2008 financial crash: the outcome of the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference meeting in Copenhagen (COP 15) was deemed by many to be an abject failure, and in his 2011 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama – the leader of the country whose economy has the biggest impact on the planet's ecology – made little or no reference to climate change or the environment.[3]

It might seem harsh to say that Suzuki's activities have been a failure; at a minimum, the demand that his advocacy on behalf of the environment should lead to wholesale political and social change seems to posit a measure of success that might be deemed unrealistic or impossible. Yet Suzuki's own assessment of his impact is no less stark and bleak: "Quite frankly, as far as I'm concerned, I feel all the effort that I've been involved in has really failed. We're going backward" (qtd. in Dixon R2). This issue of success or failure draws attention to precisely the issues I want to consider with respect to the activities of public intellectuals such as Suzuki and what form they take (or should take). Failure should be treated here as an analytic concept rather than a normative judgment; at a minimum, it helps to outline the nature of the demands for change which Suzuki and other intellectuals make, and the ways in which they narrate the movement from today's failure to tomorrow's (potential, hopeful) success. But, before turning to a discussion of Suzuki, I want to offer a quick (and necessarily crude) taxonomy of public intellectuals that will frame my subsequent discussion.

Public Intellectuals: Politics vs. Structure

Allow me to start with an admission. I have a natural suspicion of the public intellectual and the vision of the world it presumes. I say this even of those public intellectuals that interest me most – those who are willing to take on the state and existing centres and form of power, as opposed to those (also clearly public) intellectuals who tend to speak on behalf of existing social forms and warn of the need to maintain and even expand dominant ideas and existing forms of political hegemony (e.g., everyone from Allan Bloom to Canada's Margaret Wente and Rex Murphy, from Christopher Hitchens in his latter days to many of Fox News's prominent commentators). I applaud the brave interventions by those public intellectuals who take on the powerful commonplace and quotidian beliefs, ideas, and behaviours that shape social life today; I admire, too, their addition to the possibilities of what society might yet become in the future. There's no question that those voices that challenge all manner of social and political injustice, and who draw attention to the limits of the status quo have a role to play in helping to transform the societies we have into the societies we want. But even at first blush, there are a whole range of questions and problems that arise when one begins to consider the figure of the Left, critical public

intellectual (which is whom I will be focussing on below) – issues that I would feel remiss in passing over without (at least brief) comment.

First, the activity of public intellectuals and their social impact depends on a notion of expertise and of the application of Reason to problems that has been challenged by numerous critics for numerous reasons – from the Frankfurt School's powerful critique of instrumental reason (most famously in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) to more recent arguments concerning the importance of affect and passion in addition to reason in the drama of the political.[4] Second, while the importance of the kind of public pedagogy enacted by public intellectuals is celebrated by many critics (from Edward Said to Henry Giroux), others, most notably Jacques Rancière, have challenged both the theoretical claims and political necessity of the model of instruction and/or emancipation that is presumed by critique that understands itself as revealing the truth that exists behind (ideological) falsehood. At a minimum, Rancière has suggested that the impact of such activity is other than what its proponents might believe: while critique might generate difference (or newness), this is within an existing schema of concepts and beliefs rather than the full-scale paradigm shift that is often hoped for.[5] Third, there is a vanguardism associated with the activities of the public intellectual that is at odds with how political change has been theorized by a number of thinkers over the past several decades, especially (though not exclusively) by the Italian autonomists and in the influential work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.[6] In some respects, these theorists see the figure of the public intellectual as part of the *problem* rather than the solution – as a sign of a deferral of political activity and organization to leaders and (looping back around to the first point) experts who will guide the "masses" to enact changes that intellectuals have identified as important or necessary. I could continue in this vein at some length. I've yet to mention, for instance, that the work of the public intellectual tends to presume that *ideas* generate change as opposed to substantial, structural transformations that arrive only through shifts in material conditions of possibility – which is to say: to assert the importance of public intellectuals can be to reaffirm a faith in liberalism and its (problematic) vision of change through public debate in a living, active civil society (of the kind explored by Jürgen Habermas), as opposed to challenging and troubling the presumptions of liberalism via the kind of materialist critique associated with (for instance) forms of Marxist critique.

There is, then, a misfit between the understanding of the operations of the world that I (and many other academics) have learned from contemporary Left social and political philosophy, and the one presumed by the activities of David Suzuki and other public intellectuals who take on existing structures and strictures. One could summarize the former in two basic principles: (1) knowledge is intimately connected to power, and it is thus essential to challenge all claims to knowledge, especially those premised on expertise (i.e., the legitimation of knowledge claims through existing social systems and structures, whether that of the state, the university, or the media); and (2) structure is more significant than agency: whether one has (a sense of) agency and autonomy is itself generated by the structures or systems within which one lives, as opposed to being a condition that arises when one stands (impossibly) outside structure. The first principle fuels social and cultural criticism; the second dampens it, both for epistemological reasons and due to the social and historical weight of institutions whose influence and power cannot be gainsaid.[7] It is easy to see why some students and scholars of contemporary Left social and political philosophy are stuck with a deep pessimism when it comes to imagining the possibility of generating needed political change within such coordinates – which is not the same as saying that this model of the social world and the place of critique within it is (fundamentally) incorrect.

But lest it seem that I am questioning the significance and importance of (at least Left) public intellectuals *in toto* before I even attend to the work of Suzuki, let me introduce two challenges to Left theory's understanding of the social world. First, while I think that it is essential to challenge expertise and explore the links of knowledge to power, it is also the case that late capitalist society is one that is deeply and necessarily dependent on expertise. In a vast and complicated global society made up of an array of systems (economic, social, and/or technological), some individuals – whether through training or experience – will have a better understanding of these systems than others; having them draw on this expertise to engage in discussions and debates about the direction of social life is essential, even if it remains important to criticize the values or imperatives that might shape various forms and modes of expertise. Environmentalists such as Suzuki and those on whose work he draws open up perspectives we would not otherwise have regarding the implications and significance of our collective life activity; it is, simply put, a mistake to worry so much about the cult of expertise that one might thus fail to consider the knowledge that expertise produces.[8] Second, social life is not fate. While it seems to me to be important not

to imagine that social change can occur in an instant – a sudden lurk into wakefulness out of an ideological slumber, on the other side of which everything is different – it is equally important not to imagine that we are consigned to those social systems that we have created over the course of history. Nor does a suspicion about the notion of social change as a sudden revolutionary rupture or break (a perspective argued for by Slavoj Žižek and others) leave us only with the myth of progress and gradual amelioration of existing systems. Critique should point to the limits of our epistemic and economic systems, and the foundation of these limits in systems of power and social control, but do so in a manner that leaves open criticisms of what is and the political possibility of what might yet be.

There has been an enormous amount written about public intellectuals, especially over the past several decades.[9] While I don't want to repeat or provide an overview of these accounts (as tempted as I am to spend some time – as do the introduction and certain other chapters of this volume – situating such contested terms as "public" and "intellectual"), it is important when discussing the work of a figure like David Suzuki to draw a distinction between the activities of different kinds of public intellectuals – again, focussing on those critical intellectuals who are usually left of centre in their politics. There are essentially two forms of the activity of representing technical expertise or knowledge to publics as an intellectual (as opposed to a governmental official, or an expert drawn from the business class). The first is a frankly *political* mode of activism or agency. This consists of the work of shaping political positions or public policy by speaking out directly against specific actions taken (or not taken) or positions adopted (or not) by corporations, governments, international agencies, and the agents associated with all three sites of power and control. Such intellectuals include everyone from novelist Émile Zola and mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré, who spoke out in support of Captain Alfred Dreyfus during the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the nineteenth century, to the activities of Edward Said on behalf of Palestine; from Dr. Henry Morgentaler's actions on behalf of the women's access to abortion, to the work of Canadian writers and artists in support of government agencies such as the Canada Council or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; and many other actions directed towards a range of actors and institutions, such as Canadian political activist Maude Barlow's championing of global water rights. Much of the work of public intellectuals fits into this category of the political, which might be characterized as a form of lobbying whose impact comes about through the intellectual's capacity

to draw on their particular reservoirs of technical expertise or experience, as well as their ability to shape public and governmental perspectives on the (topical) issues in question.

A second form of intervention by public intellectuals can be termed *structural*. In this case, intellectuals are less interested in shaping policy or political decisions (though this, too, can be an outcome of their activity) than in engaging with problems that are embedded in the very structure of contemporary systems – political, social, economic, and ecological, or often all of these taken together. A political public intellectual might want to challenge (say) the decision by the Canadian government to participate in the war on Afghanistan; a public intellectual interested in structural questions will want to call attention to the very limits of what constitutes democratic decision making in Canada – limits that make certain government decisions predictable, if not inevitable.[10] By "structure" I am calling attention to both the material *and* cultural systems that constitute social life in the twentieth century – everything from our belief systems, to the concrete, everyday operations of our systems of governance and the institutions associated with them, to the shape and physical coordinates of our urban spaces. This might seem too broad and indiscriminate a category to be a meaningful one. Yet I think it usefully draws attention to the level of change demanded by some public intellectuals, and points, too, to the horizon of its possibility.

In the *political* cases mentioned above, the change demanded can be accommodated within the existing parameters of state systems and capitalist economics. For example, the accusations against Captain Alfred Dreyfus, which prompted Zola's famous letter, were shown to be driven by French anti-Semitism rather than by any real evidence against him; abortion is (at a minimum) more accessible to Canadian women than it was previously due to Morgentaler's defiance of the law and advocacy on the behalf of the right of women's choice; and petitions and media campaigns by writers and artists have meant that Canadian governments continue to be cautious when it comes to making substantial cuts to funding for the arts or for the CBC. Even in the case of the causes championed by Barlow or Said, the potential resolution lies within existing politico-juridical and economic structures, however blind (in the cause of global water rights) or intransigent (in the case of Palestine) governments and nongovernmental agencies might be.

What needs to change in the case of those public intellectuals who devote themselves to *structural* causes? In a word, *everything* – not just this or that practice or decision by actually existing governments, but

(for instance) the form of government itself; the manner and degree to which citizens participate in it; the values that underlie it and society at large; and its understanding of its own aims, function and purpose. There are two dominant issues that public intellectuals engaged today with structural issues tend to focus on: the environment and capitalism. In the latter case, thinkers such as Noam Chomsky or Slavoj Žižek might decry the specific actions of specific governments, but they do so in order to draw attention to the larger systems or structures that generate such decisions and actions, especially the forms of economic (and so social and political) injustice and exploitation that are a necessary outcome of capitalism. Concerns about the environment are, of course, necessarily related to capitalism. Though some might imagine that it is possible to engage in actions that would ameliorate human impacts on the environment *within* capitalism – for instance, through mechanisms such as carbon taxes or market incentives to generate alternative sources of energy – most environmentalists see the imperatives for perpetual growth and profit that animate capitalism as working at cross purposes to their own aims. Intellectuals who attend to structure make a radical and difficult demand on the publics to which they speak – not that they vote differently, or that they drive or consume less, but that they consider moving collectively in an entirely new direction – one whose form and outcome cannot be easily mapped or imagined concretely in advance.

David Suzuki's work as a public intellectual has taken place in both the political and structural registers. He locates the beginning of his career as a public intellectual in his involvement as a speaker at a rally on April 4, 1968, at the University of British Columbia, during which students and faculty came together to express sorrow about the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and to express solidarity with all those engaged in the work of social justice. Drawing on the energies of 1968's political upheavals, at this rally Suzuki spoke out about racism in Canada and the incarceration of Japanese Canadians during World War II (*Autobiography* 52–53). Much of Suzuki's first autobiography, *Metamorphosis: Stages in a Life* (1987) addresses the racism experienced by his parents – who were "evacuated" by the Canadian government to Slocan City, BC, in the wake of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 – and by himself as he moved through the ranks of academia. His interest in discussing publicly the social responsibilities of science can be linked to his early antiracist activism. In *Metamorphosis*, Suzuki narrates his gradual shift from lab to broadcast booth as occurring via his recognition of the role that his field of scientific study – genetics – had played

in legitimating racial politics over the course of its history (234–45). Though some of the environmental themes that have dominated his work over the past twenty-five years do appear in this first autobiography, they come as asides: the Suzuki of 1987 is concerned with making science a part of public discourse and political decision making, rather than pointedly and provocatively drawing our attention to the *structural* depth of the environmental and social problems we face. While he has not moved away entirely from the political to the structural – that is, from proposing "solutions" to our environmental crises (for instance, through the Suzuki Foundation's Nature Challenge[11]) or lobbying governments about the need to amend or shape policy decisions – he has increasingly focussed his energies on making an argument for the necessity of a radical, paradigm shift if contemporary society is to address the problems he and other environmentalists have identified. "Only by confronting the enormity and unsustainability of our impact on the biosphere," he claims at the outset of *Legacy*, "will we take the search for alternative ways to live as seriously as we must" (3).

The challenge confronting Suzuki and other public intellectuals who address themselves to the task of redefining the fundamental social structures of society is *how* they might accomplish the outcome they seek. His recent books, articles,; and 2010 CBC Radio series, *A Bottom Line*, are filled with pleas for the necessity of quick action given the degree of damage already done to the environment and the length of time required to "undo" it (should this even be possible). I want now to turn to a consideration of Suzuki's understanding of his role as a public intellectual and of the strategies he employs to try to generate an awareness of the fact that the environment represents a structural challenge on an unprecedented scale. Working through the challenges he faces and some of the solutions he has developed provides insight not only into the thoughts of Canada's most prominent public intellectual, but some of the problems and possibilities of public advocacy more generally today.

Knowledge, Belief, Action

The claim or argument that some of the fundamental ways in which a society organizes itself is problematic or mistaken is easy enough to make. However, to achieve the change required – especially when it is claimed that doing so with speed is essential – is enormously difficult.

There have been few massive, rapid social or political revolutions (e.g., the Russian Revolution, the Cultural Revolution in China) in the modern period, each with its own traumas, problems, crises, successes, and failures; even by these measures, however, the social change demanded to reduce significantly the human impact on the environment is of a depth and scale that can be difficult to comprehend. Despite increasing levels of scientific evidence to the contrary, an ever-increasing number of Westerners are expressing scepticism about the reality of climate change (as Monbiot discusses); even amongst the (still) majority who believe in the deleterious impact of human activity on climate and on the environment more generally, the ever-present gap between belief and action suggests that we enact what Žižek has termed "cynical reason" on a daily basis: there is broad understanding that how our society is structured impacts the environment, and knowledge that change – at a minimum – of individual behaviour is required, but with little effective impact on (for instance) automobile usage or flights by many in the Global North to warm weather destinations for their annual vacations.[12]

Like other public intellectuals, Suzuki understands his efforts as a form of public pedagogy that works through argument and reason. Like most other public intellectuals, his sense of how broad decisions in the development of society are constituted is through the Enlightenment drama outlined by Immanuel Kant, in which history constitutes a passage of humanity from immaturity to maturity through the application of reason to the problems it encounters. In an era in which the movements and circulation of knowledge might perhaps be seen as more complex than Kant's (due in part to the sheer scale of information, in part to the speed with which it is circulated by new communication technologies), Suzuki understands his specific role to be that of an expert who can help publics navigate issues that demand significant training and time to understand, both of which are today in short supply:

> I have read many books and articles, met many people, acquired information and knowledge, and reflected a lot about issues, all of which has shaped the way I see the problems. It has become clear to me over the years that it would be very difficult and time-consuming for people who are starting to get involved to wade through the same volume of material in a short period. And if the issues are urgent, then those of us who are

> pressing those issues have a responsibility at the very least to help people avoid unnecessary material or sources and get up to speed faster, still on their own but with some shortcuts to assist them. (*Autobiography* 350)

In both *Legacy* and *Autobiography*, Suzuki repeatedly expresses faith in the power of human reason to address and overcome problems and limits. He writes in *Legacy*: "Our great evolutionary advantage was the ability to lift our sights and look ahead, to imagine the world as it could be and then make the best choices to move toward that vision" (88). Suzuki is clearly frustrated by the gap between those actions that this evolutionary foresight should manifest and the limit on the actual changes that have taken place in human social organization and behaviour in relation to the environment. This frustration shapes the rhetorical form of *Legacy* and *The Sacred Balance* (1997), an earlier book that *Legacy*'s structure mimics. In each, Suzuki resorts frequently to a form of shaming through a critique of the very intelligence that is supposed to be guiding us from present to future. "We say we are intelligent," he writes, "but what intelligent creature, knowing the role the earth plays in constructing our very bodies, would then proceed to use the earth as a dump for our waste and toxic material? […] We are the earth, and whatever we do to the earth, we do to ourselves" (*Sacred* 78). He suggests that there is no disagreement over what the future we might want should look like (89); human beings understand, too, that our actions are damaging the environment in ways that impede the possibility of this future coming into being. So why do they not act differently, especially given the fact that reason and human intelligence suggests that they – that we – should?

This problem is the fundamental one that Suzuki addresses – or at least, *should* address – in his advocacy as a public intellectual. However, his work continues to emphasize the importance of communicating information about the environment, especially data framed in the mode of what I have termed elsewhere "eco-apocalypse": frightening statistics that are intended, it would seem, to either kick-start the intellect or engage dormant survival instincts by communicating the scale of the human impact on the planet (e.g., humanity has coopted 40% of photosynthetic activity on the planet; some scientists estimate that by 2048 there will be no commercially viable fish species left on the planet; an estimated fifty thousand species are driven to extinction annually; and so on).[13] Suzuki's dependence on the idea of public reason prompts him to continue to engage in the task of passing along such information, a task underwritten by a faith in the idea that the

gap between understanding and action is simply due to a lack of relevant data or a misunderstanding of the severity of the consequences suggested by it.

This faith in the function of information drives many public intellectuals to try to maximize the impact of their ideas through the media that they use to communicate. And certainly, Suzuki's presence across multiple media – radio, newspapers, television, (adult and children's) books, film, the Internet – might be read in this way: as a frantic demand for the attention necessitated by the cause he wishes to advocate. Yet for someone whose status as a public figure owes a great deal to his televisual presence, in both *Metamorphosis* and *Autobiography* he is acutely critical of the medium's capacity to develop the kind and degree of environmental knowledge for which he might hope. Suzuki pulls no punches: "Television is an ephemeral medium; a program we might work for months to create flashes onto the screen to an audience often distracted by other activities – feeding the kids, answering the phone, going to the toilet, walking the dog, getting a drink. Viewers aren't fully engaged through the entire program, and what is ultimately remembered may be a snippet" (*Autobiography* 64). In both autobiographies, he is intent on demystifying his own role as host: far from being the expert on any and every topic that appears on *The Nature of Things with David Suzuki*, he wants it to be known that he is little more than a talking head who does the "stand ups" that come at the beginning and end of shows, as well as during short connective visual interstices. In addition to whatever information the show might convey – ephemerally, in the midst of those demands of daily life that can write them out of the picture – the primary function of a serial genre like a weekly educational or news program is to generate trust and belief in the host. Television functions not to maximize the circulation of information on an issue – in this case, an issue legitimated by an expert – but to identify Suzuki in this manner as a public figure with the capacity to act on behalf of the public that media brings into existence:

> I wanted to empower the public, but the opposite happened because of the nature of the medium. Regular viewers of *The Nature of Things with David Suzuki* watch the program on faith that what we present is important and true, and they come to expect me to tell them what to do or to act on their behalf. If I phone a politician's office, even the prime minister's, chances are very good that my call will be returned within half an hour – not because I'm an important person, but because an informed politician knows that a million and a half people watch my shows regularly. (*Autobiography* 68)

This faith and belief in the host only has significance, however, if it affords some ability to generate those changes he desires. An informed politician or businessperson – those brave enough to take Suzuki on, such as Canada's Environment Minister, Jim Prentice, and the Executive Vice President of Shell Canada, both of whom are the focus of episodes of *The Bottom Line* – might recognize that Suzuki has a considerable public presence and could impact the bottom line or the outcome of elections. Nevertheless, the degree to which such figures are able or willing to envision or make manifest the kinds of wide-scale, structural changes needed to address the environmental crisis is doubtful. As an intellectual who has had a public profile for four decades, Suzuki understands not just the limits of contemporary media in generating a change of belief – much less a change in action – but the need to produce new narratives through which it might be possible to communicate both the urgency of his message and close the gap separating knowledge, belief, and action.

I've written above that *Legacy* and *Sacred Balance* exhibit a frustration at the limits of human reason to produce action. While not abandoning the hope that rational argumentation and the purveyance of fact might reshape the views of the public, these books take up the challenge of proposing new narratives about the environment. At the core of *Sacred Balance* are chapters organized around the Greek classical elements of air, water, earth, and fire. The arguments that Suzuki makes combine scientific knowledge with myth, poetry, and literature; there are charts, tables, and figures of scientific data included in the narrative that expand on points made, but just as frequently these asides constitute excurses in history and literature. The chapter on air, for instance, includes an excerpt from Father José de Acosta's *Natural and Moral History* (1590), which describes "the sickness of the Andes" – a "disease" that turns out to be a lack of oxygen at high altitudes (*Sacred* 31); it also includes an account of the Chernobyl disaster and the movement of radioactive materials around the planet (*Sacred* 31). Spread throughout the book are short quotations from a huge range of sources, each of which speaks to the significance of the classical elements for human life, or addresses more generally the way in which humanity is ultimately dependent on nature. These include quotes from scientists such as Albert Einstein, Paul Ehrlich, and Edward O. Wilson; poets and novelists, such as George Eliot, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Butler Yeats; passages from the Bible (Genesis, Ecclesiastes, etc.); and quotes from indigenous religions and ancient narratives. On one hand,

this makes for a messy book that seems intent on mixing and matching very different epistemologies and ontologies, connecting them only through their (sometimes incidental) reference to one of the elements, to nature, or to human interdependence or interconnectivity. On the other hand, this shift to a multidimensional narrative of love, the sacred, and significance and meaning in one's life offers a rich, compelling, and original account of the importance of nature and of the trauma of environmental loss and devastation, and does so in a way that rubs against the grain of Suzuki's public persona as a scientist.

The structure of *Legacy* – remember, what Suzuki has said will be his last book – mimics *Sacred Balance* in almost every respect: the breakout passages (though there are no charts or figures), which put one in mind of the Spinozian-inspired scholia of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* more than they do a science text; the interstitial quotations (from an equally eclectic mix of figures, such as Marcel Proust, Anita Roddick, Johann von Goethe, Inuit elder Annette Helmer, and others); and the articulation of an argument based (in part) on scientific fact via the structure of the classical elements – a structure that one might have expected to be anathema to modern science. In *Sacred Balance*, Suzuki prepares us for the mix of narratives to come by arguing that "we have much to learn from the vast repositories of knowledge that still exist in traditional societies […] leading members of the scientific community are starting to understand that science alone cannot fulfill humankind's needs; indeed, it has become a destructive force. We need a new kind of science that approaches the traditional knowledge of indigenous communities" (26). *Legacy* adopts a similar pose, beginning with an account of the Big Bang and evolution described as "every bit as fantastic as myths of the past" (6–7) and speaking immediately to the question of the status of scientific knowledge in relation to other forms of knowledge. In "Traditional Narratives," the title of the first aside in the book, Suzuki writes:

> For most of human existence, we were oral creatures, sharing experiences, insights, and beliefs through the stories we told. Woven into the stories were implicit lessons about how to respond to the world around us […] Until very recently, all of humankind was local and tribal, following game and plants through the seasons in a nomadic existence of hunting and gathering. Contrary to popular belief, our ancient ancestors were not slow-witted, primitive savages. They were human beings with the same genetic heritage as twenty-first century people. (8)

Sacred Balance and *Legacy* appear to constitute examples of the "new kind of science" for which he calls. In the twenty years since his first autobiography was published, indigenous knowledges and the role and place of indigenous peoples in environmental struggles have become a primary object of Suzuki's interests and energies. *Metamorphosis* makes no mention of indigenous communities or Canadian First Nations. By contrast, the main focus of *Autobiography* is on his activities in relation to and on behalf of (as a public intellectual and through the work of the Suzuki Foundation) indigenous communities in Canada (113–33), Brazil (134–93), Australia (195–216), and Papua New Guinea (288–304). In the opening pages of the second autobiography, Suzuki names himself as "an elder"; *Legacy* features this word in its subtitle. The language of "elder" is one that Suzuki draws as much from his own Japanese heritage as from the various indigenous communities with whom he has worked and lived. It represents a very different relationship to knowledge than that of the "expert" – knowledge built up out of experience rather than the communication of technical prowess, and one whose legitimacy arises less from a relationship to accepted knowledge-producing structures within society (such as universities) than from memory. Suzuki identifies a "remarkable congruence of scientific insights and traditional knowledge, as we are beginning to recognize that what were once pristine forests and shores were in fact moulded by sophisticated human activity" (*Legacy* 84–85). Despite this congruence, there are at least two reasons why science might require the insights of traditional knowledge in order to address our environmental crisis. First, contemporary societies have an increasingly short memory, a point he makes in both *Legacy* (55, 60–61) and *Autobiography* (376). The problem here is one of norms: the pace of change and (a point that brings us back to Suzuki's warnings about media) a focus on the immediate means that it becomes nearly impossible to establish baselines that might be used in the restoration of nature. In one of *The Legacy*'s excurses, Suzuki tells the story of changes to the neighbourhood in which he grew up: a grove of trees in an empty lot were chopped down to make way for an apartment building; those who came to live in the building had no sense that the trees had ever existed, and as the original inhabitants grew up or moved, memory of the trees faded away. Elders provide this form of memory-knowledge that is important to create a sense not only of what was, but of what could – or should – be.

The second element that traditional knowledge can add to science is a focus on the whole rather than on the constituent parts of nature.

Suzuki values indigenous knowledges because they emphasize the deep interrelation of human life and ecology. These knowledges are not stitched together from increasingly detailed and specific forms of technical or scientific expertise, but are the outcome of an epochal or *longue durée* experience of living in nature rather than in opposition to it.[14] The fragmentation of a single system into constituent parts is a feature not only of much scientific thought, but of politics as well: "trees fall under the 'management' of the minister of forests; the salmon under the ministers of tourism (sports fishers), Indian and northern affairs (native food fishers), and fisheries and oceans (commercial fishers); eagles, bears, and wolves under the minister of the environment; the water under the minister of agriculture (for irrigation) or energy (hydro power); the rocks and mountains under the minister of mining" (*Legacy* 64). Without narratives that enable a comprehension of the deep interconnection of all aspects of the environment, it becomes impossible to generate a response to the impact of the current technical, social, and political systems that manage knowledge and memory in its component parts.

It is this emphasis on the whole that is at the heart of Suzuki's most recent writing and reflection on the environment. The mixture of different elements in *Legacy* is not meant to sideline or displace the importance (or indeed, even the centrality) of scientific knowledge in our understanding of the ecological impact of human activities. It does suggest, however, that what is required more than information is a new narrative through which human beings might understand themselves and their relationship to nature. Employing the classical elements as a structure through which to narrate his vision for a sustainable future is a way of dragging the cosmological into the quotidian. Each element points to an interconnection of humanity with nature *and* of humanity with humanity that stretches across borders and even across time: "we are air […] . every breath we take contains argon atoms that were once in the bodies of Joan of Arc and Jesus Christ; every breath contains argon atoms that were once in dinosaurs 65 million years ago; and every breath will suffuse all life far into the future" (75); "every drink we take has water molecules that evaporated from the canopies of every forest in the world, from all the oceans and plains" (76); and "we are the earth, and whatever we do to the earth, we do to ourselves" (78). It might seem as if speaking as an elder instead of as a scientist – and in speaking often of the sacred character of these relations with air, water, earth, and fire – means that Suzuki has abandoned the position that we have come to associate with him as a public intellectual. But I think that it is a

mistake to see these recent books in this way – that is, as the reflections of an elder on the sacred and the cosmological in the shadow of his own mortality (Dr. Suzuki turned seventy-five in 2011). Shifting away from a mode of address through which an expert speaks to a (presumably) unknowing audience with the aim of educating them is intended to help close the gap between belief and action, and to do so with the aim of generating the necessary degree of sociostructural change required today. This is not a mere rhetorical ploy to court public interest in the environment – a "dumbing down" of science or sacralization of it to make it palatable to publics – but a way of reinforcing the degree to which the human is a single species that shares common interests. And these interests go beyond dealing collectively with a global problem that transcends national borders, but extends a shared understanding of the kinds of factors that would – in Suzuki's view – make human life genuinely meaningful and productive.

But it is with another kind of totality with which I want to end. As I claimed earlier, it seems all but impossible to address the problems of the environment without naming what is perhaps the primary structuring element of our social and political lives: *capitalism*. Yet despite the fact that Suzuki has taken up the challenge of advocating for and somehow generating large-scale structural changes, he seems careful to avoid naming capitalism directly (the word appears only once in *Legacy*). His preferred term is "economics." In *Legacy*, he is unrelenting in his criticism of the limits of economics.[15] Suzuki is aware that current forms of economics are driven by a logic of endless growth that cannot but have a deleterious impact on the environment (47); he is similarly critical of the predominance of economic value as a near universal measure, a mode of social valuation whose outcome is that "those things that matter most to us are worthless" (91). Even within its own measure of value, mainstream economics is incapable of measuring either the "input" of nature or the impact of its "output": "the economy is built on extracting raw materials from the biosphere and pouring wastes back into it without regard to [its] services. Disregarding nature and her services is ultimately suicidal, yet it is exactly what conventional economics does" (43). If the logic of growth (which is to say, profit) and value that constitutes economics is at the heart of the impact that human beings have had on the environment, one might expect more explicit arguments from Suzuki that challenge dependence on these social narratives. As I've argued above, I think this is what Suzuki *has* been attempting in his recent work; importantly, he insists: "Capitalism, free

enterprise, the economy, markets, corporations, and currency are not natural elements or forces of nature […] We created them and if they are not working, we can change them" (39).

There is something lost, though, in not naming capitalism directly and in equating capitalism with economics as such. The attempt to bridge the gap between belief and action founders in its evocation of the cosmological without an interrogation of the material (Suzuki travels as far as Feuerbach, we might say, but not as far as Marx). This last quotation extends an invitation to produce change as a result of an insight into the mechanisms of a system that doesn't work, and for that reason alone, should be fixed: we're back to the beginning, though now armed with a more detailed and deeper normative critique of the coldness with which economics (and, insofar as it, too, tends towards instrumentality, science) surveys the world. To speak of capitalism instead of economics would mean to take seriously the mechanisms through which capitalism is naturalized *as* economics, such that it becomes extremely difficult to imagine a genuine other to it, if and when it is even possible to challenge it at all. The irrationality of economics to which Suzuki appeals actively prevents a direct confrontation with what lies at the heart of the distance separating belief and action when it comes to the environment: the mechanisms of hegemony that have been studied in depth by Left humanists over the past half century. It is perhaps Raymond Williams who offers the best description of just what constitutes hegemony and why it should generate impasses even in the midst of an understanding or knowledge of one's circumstances. For Williams, hegemony is

> a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a 'culture', but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. (110)

In the end, the problem of the environment – which is the problem of nothing less than the ability to mobilize change in a deep, systemic way – has to be addressed through a direct interrogation of the mechanisms that constitute reality, and not only through the production of

another more palatable narrative of how "we" should be. Suzuki's recent work goes a long way in this direction – farther than many might recognize – but it pulls back at the last moment.[16] His criticism of the suicidal disregard of nature by economics in *Legacy*, for instance, ends with an unexpected turn to the economic fiction of sustainability: "The tragedy – and the opportunity – is that if done properly, many renewable resources can be harvested indefinitely" (39).

Perhaps Suzuki's reluctant to speak about capitalism directly is to be expected. After all, can a *scientist* speak about capitalism as a public intellectual – that is, someone whose expertise seems to stop short of those whom have legitimacy to speak knowingly about capitalism, that is, economists? The larger question may be whether any public intellectual can today challenge capitalism directly and remain legitimately *public* while doing so. Even if capitalism is at the heart of the failure of imagination in contemporary social life, it seems to have become difficult to speak about such matters directly and unabashedly instead of appealing (for whatever purposes) only to changes *within* our contemporary social and political system.[17] Suzuki's brave work on behalf of public education about our present global circumstances is laudable. So too, is his experimentation with imagining and producing new social narratives that might allow us to unthink our servile dependence on the dream and drama of an endless economic growth that appears as natural as the seasons themselves. Whether it will produce the changes needed, within the time they are needed, may well depend on a more direct and fearless confrontation with that system of quotidian intelligibility from which we have thus far seemed unable – or unwilling – to shake ourselves loose.

NOTES

I want to thank Justin Sully, Sarah Blacker, and the editors of this volume for their comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this chapter.

1 Along with many others, Suzuki identifies the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 as the founding moment of the contemporary environmental movement. As he points out, "in 1962, there wasn't a single department or ministry of the environment on the planet" (*Autobiography* 267).

2 Canada was a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol (adopted December 1997 and ratified in Canada in 2002), which mandated a reduction of total greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2% from the 1990 level. The government of Stephen Harper has largely ignored Kyoto, which is one of the reasons that Canada was singled out for criticism by protestors and participants at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December 2009. The Harper government has suggested that it would try to support the outcome of COP 15, which is not binding and which drops Kyoto's stated aim of reducing emissions by 80% by 2050. While this volume was in process, Canada announced its formal withdrawal from Kyoto. For the newer figures on greenhouse gas emissions, consult the most recent *How Canada Performs*, specifically the section "GHG per capita," on the Conference Board of Canada's website (See "GHG Emissions per Capita").
3 See Cazdyn and Szeman (32–3) and Hertzberger (21–2).
4 For examples of the latter, see Connolly and Panagia.
5 See Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator* (25–49); for a different take on the relationship between Rancière's work and the public (as) intellectual, see Jason Haslam's contribution to this volume.
6 Hardt and Negri's *Empire* and Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* are two representative texts.
7 I follow Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of how structure and agency are framed in relation to one another: "The social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects. Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world. It is what makes the games of society – not least, the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle" (26).
8 This is perhaps especially the case when it comes to environmental issues and concerns. In "Two Faces of the Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen," Michael Hardt points out that unlike many forms of

political and social oppression, "the basic facts of climate change – for example, the increasing proportion of CO_2 in the atmosphere and its effects – are highly scientific and abstract from our daily experiences. Projects of public pedagogy can help spread such scientific knowledge, but in contrast to the knowledge based in the experience of subordination, this is fundamentally and expert knowledge" (273).

9 For a useful overview, see McLaughlin.

10 For recent accounts of the limits of liberal democratic elections as they are presently constituted, see Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* and Badiou and Žižek. For Badiou, there is a lack of radical possibility in existing Western political systems because in standard parliamentarianism, in its usual functioning, the majority and the opposition are commensurable. There is obviously a common measure between the majority and the opposition, which means you do not have the paradoxical relation. You have differences, naturally, but these differences do not amount to a paradoxical relationship; on the contrary, they constitute a regular, law-governed relationship. This is easily grasped: since sooner or later (this is what is referred to as 'democratic alternation') the opposition will replace the majority, or take its place, it is indeed necessary for there to be a common measure between the two. If you don't have a common measure, you will not be able to substitute the one with the other. So the terms are commensurable, and to the extent that they are commensurable you do not have the situation of radical exception (17–8).

11 The Nature Challenge posed ten possible ways individuals could reduce their impact on the environment, and asked them to adopt at least three of them in the year ahead. The ten "steps" are

1. Reduce home energy by 10 percent
2. Choose energy-efficient home and appliances
3. Don't use pesticides
4. Eat meat-free meals one day a week
5. Buy locally grown and produced food
6. Choose a fuel-efficient vehicle
7. Walk, bike, carpool or take public transit one day a week
8. Choose a home close to work or school
9. Support alternative transportation
10. Learn more and share information with others. (*Autobiography* 262)

12 On the role played by cynical reason in relation to environmental crisis, see Žižek (420–61). Žižek's notion of cynical reason is drawn from Peter Sloterdijk's groundbreaking *Critique of Cynical Reason*. The first part of Sloterdijk's wide-ranging book probes the constitution of what he

identifies as the "new attitude of consciousness toward 'objectivity,'" which he names "enlightened false consciousness." This "new cynicism" draws on the productive negativity of the enlightenment but also rejects any possibility of hope or new values that might result from it. The cynicism (or sarcasm) Sloterdijk detects in contemporary thought is "a matter of the social and existential limits of enlightenment. The compulsion to survive and desire to assert itself have demoralized enlightened consciousness. It is afflicted with the compulsion to put up with preestablished relations that it finds dubious, to accommodate itself to them, and finally even to carry out their business" (5–6). It is easy to see the implications of this form of enlightened false consciousness for contemporary explorations of the gap between belief and action on environmental issues.

Cynicism was not always thus. The Greek Cynics (for instance, Diogenes) might be said to have advocated a form of anarchist environmentalism: a disavowal of power and money, a rejection of property and social distinctions, and an embrace of a simple life in harmony with the natural world. Cynicism might well be what is needed to counteract (contemporary) cynical reason.

13 These examples are taken from Suzuki, *Legacy*. For a discussion of eco-apocalypse, see Szeman.

14 Suzuki makes this point in *Autobiography* as well: "One of the terrifying aspects of globalization and economics is that this kind of knowledge is not seen as having value in a modern industrialized world, and what has taken thousands of years of careful observation, experimentation, and insight is being lost all over the planet in just a few generations and will never be recovered. This information is far more profound than current science, because it has been tested over time with the survival of those who possessed the knowledge" (212).

15 In recent years, Suzuki returns again and again to a criticism of economics. See, for instance, Suzuki and Moola.

16 The long feature story on Suzuki in *Maclean's* practically gloats at the necessity of "Saint Suzuki" to have to reign in his "revolutionary" impulses in order to deal with corporations in a less critical and dismissive fashion, especially with respect to the work and funding of his Foundation (see MacQueen). Even so, it is clear that Suzuki remains generally critical of the activities of corporations (see Babiak).

17 In a slightly different context, Nancy Fraser has described such critique as "affirmative," that is, as "aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them" (23).

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