ECOLOGICAL THREADS IN GEORGE F. KENNAN'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Piotr Kimla

The Jagiellonian University, ul. Gołębia 24, 31-007 Kraków, Poland

We should do all we can to try to convince ourselves
and the rest of the world that we've got to stop abusing
the environment of this whole planet. It's not just one person's,
one country's problem. It's a universal problem today.

George F. Kennan

I am not an urban person, and I don't trust the great urban environment.

George F. Kennan

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show George F. Kennan's less popular face. He will be described not so much as a diplomat, but as an interesting political thinker with strong conservative inclinations. A thinker who deals with ecological issues in his works and public speeches in a fundamental rather than temporary manner. Treating ecological issues very seriously, Kennan can be placed within a broader trend of American anti-urbanism. His position also shows that there are no significant ideological grounds determining that ecological issues are to be monopolised by left-wing circles or parties. Kennan's position seems to inspire the question why a person with conservative views should be insensitive to the degradation of the natural environment of the planet on which he lives? The subject-matter of the analysis in the reflections presented below are three questions. Firstly, it is Kennan's look at the relationship between the human being and nature. Secondly, it is the American thinker's attitude to big urban areas, in particular the threats to human health, morality and freedom that they generate. Thirdly, it is Kennan's diagnosis of the ability of the democratic system to undertake the gigantic task of protection of the natural environment. Kennan's attitude to the aforementioned issues was reconstructed mainly on the basis of the following sources: Memoirs 1925-1950, Memoirs 1950-1963, a famous interview with George Urban and Democracy and the Student Left – a book prepared after the publication of a speech delivered by Kennan at Swarthmore College, entitled "Rebels Without a Program", in The New York Times Sunday Magazine.

Key words: *George F. Kennan, man and nature, rural area, urban area, anti-industrialism, anti-urbanism, industrial revolution, 18th century statesmanship, automobile and urban area, destructive impact of television and commercial industry on human conduct and thinking, elitism, responsibility, democracy and nature preservation*

Kennan as a political thinker

George F. Kennan is recognised in the world of politics as an outstanding American diplomat and the father of the 'containment policy' – according to Daniel P. Moynihan, it was the first 'serious theoretical attempt within the American foreign policy establishment to understand the consequences for world affairs of a suddenly substantial and quite visible Soviet power' [1]. Kennan paved the way for the 'containment policy' through his 'Long Telegram' and an article published on its basis in the Foreign Affairs magazine. Entitled *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* [2], the article was published under the pseudonym "X" (thus, it is also referred to as the "X Article"), although its author was identified quite quickly. Undoubtedly, the above texts shaped to a large extent the policy initiated by the administration of President Harry Truman, although the author's intentions were distorted to some extent, which Kennan himself often emphasised [3]. These texts also changed Kennan's status for ever,

because he moved from the third or second diplomatic level to the first level. And this refers not only to the world of American diplomacy. As a result of the Long Telegram, Kennan became also a leading American intellectualist and historian. In this context, it is worth quoting the following fragment of his Memoirs: 'The effect produced in Washington by this elaborate pedagogical effort [the Long Telegram – P.K.] was nothing less than sensational. It was one that changed my career and my life in very basic ways. If none of my previous literary efforts had seemed to evoke even the faintest tinkle from the bell at which they were aimed, this one, to my astonishment, struck it squarely and set it vibrating with a resonance that was not to die down for many months' [4].

In the reflections presented below, I wish to point out another side of Kennan's intellectual activity. My intention is to focus on ecological topics in his thinking, which inevitably leads to his interesting political philosophy with clear conservative tendencies. Strictly speaking, ecological and anti-industrial reflections present there are a result of his very traditional perception of the human being and his place in the world, which referred to the 18th century. This places the author of *Democracy and the Student Left* in a broader trend of American anti-urbanism, which is represented by a number of outstanding American figures, such as Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Adams or Frank Lloyd Wright. The importance attached by Kennan to the natural environment was presumably influenced not only by the place of his birth (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), but also by his Russian experience and personal feeling of affinity with Russians, Russian literature or culture in its broader sense, which is illustrated adequately by Kennan's statement that Russia was part of his blood. In this paper, I intend to analyse the following three issues: the relationship between the human being and nature interpreted by Kennan, his attitude to big cities and problems that they generate with regard to human health, morality and freedom and the deficiencies of the democratic system in terms of effective protection of the natural environment.

The human being vs. nature

In his famous interview with George Urban, Kennan states that 'I don't trust human beings to live successfully too far away from nature. We are all animals in part, and it does us good to be reminded of our affinity with growing tilings and the animal kingdom. I feel sorry for children who are brought up without any sense of intimacy with dogs and horses and pigs, because living near animals teaches us something about ourselves. A reasonably close contact with nature seems to me one of the great sources of psychic health' [5]. In light of the above words, the lack of Kennan's enthusiasm for the industrial revolution is not particularly surprising. Moreover, he perceives it as 'the source of most of the bewilderments and failures of the modern age' [6]. Obviously, the conservatism of the author of *The Cloud of Danger* is not reactionism aimed at restoring the world as it existed before the industrial revolution. He does not even go so far as to object to the general technical development that was gaining momentum at the beginning of the 19th century. However, the American diplomat believes that the development of technology should have been kept under certain control and should not have taken place without broader reference to the general impact on society. Obviously, it is difficult to charge the people of the early 19th century, who believed in the saving role of science and technology, with not having predicted adverse effects of the revolution initiated by them, such as the polluted air and water, the ozone hole and the greenhouse effect, etc. The only remedy that Kennan sees is a return to simpler forms of life. This is why he glorifies rural and small-town life. A good exemplification of this glorification can be the fragment of Kennan's Memoirs in which he describes Russian life on the outskirts of Moscow in 1952: 'Everything takes place in a genial intimacy and informality; hammers ring; roosters crow, goats tug at their tethers, barefoot women hoe vigorously at the potato patches, small boys play excitedly in the little streams and ponds, family parties sit at crude wooden tables in the gardens under the young fruit trees. The great good earth of Mother Russia, long ignored in favour of childish industrial fetishes of the earlier Communist period, seems once more to exude her benevolent and maternal warmth over man and beast and growing things together; and only, perhaps, American ambassador (...) is effectively isolated, as though by an invisible barrier, from participation in the general beneficence of nature and human sociability' [7]. Naturally, Kennan's mentality is too refined to idealise rural life without criticism and ignore its unpleasant aspects and flaws, such as the

narrow-mindedness or viciousness of people living there. Nevertheless, he regards it as a better guarantee of successful life. In his view, contact with nature has the power of soothing frustrations and disappointments that each human being experiences in his life. This is manifested clearly by his words expressed at the end of the 1960s, when the American thinker took up the challenge of diagnosing the state of mind of the rebellious leftist student youth. In *Democracy and the Student Left*, he writes that to none of the students who flooded him with correspondence after reading his speech delivered at Swarthmore College, entitled *Rebels Without a Program*, in the New York Times Sunday Magazine 'does it seem to occur that frustration might conceivably be alleviated by the enjoyment of nature: by a proximity to animals and wildlife or by an occupation with growing things' [8]. Obviously, the lack of thinking about nature as a potential source of alleviation of failures demonstrated by students is connected with the lack of thinking about its protection. This is difficult to understand for Kennan not only because he is greatly and continuously concerned about the reckless destruction of the natural environment, but also because full consequences of this destruction will arise in thirty or forty years, when Kennan is no longer alive, but contemporary students will still walk on the earth and will be forced to face the devastation at which they looked differently. Moving to the year 1976, when Kennan's interview to Urban took place, we must note that the tendency to respect or even propagate the lifestyle of small towns and villages still existed in American popular culture at that time. However, essential cultural processes occurring in the United States, including, most of all, the concentration of tone-setting social, political and cultural life in big urban areas, contradict the ideals represented by the village and the small town.

As a result of Kennan's attachment to the simple rural form of life – life based on continuous contact with nature that he considers to build healthy and strong character, he perceives himself as a man who does not fit the modern industrialised and urbanised epoch. He perceives himself as a man with a temper corresponding to the standards of the 18th century. He also believes that the 18th-century people 'had more convincing values and better tastes than those whose roots were in the society that issued from the Industrial Revolution' [9]. In addition, he says that 'Statesmanship, even in the United States, up to the end of the 18th century was largely rurally based – it came from people with estates in the country who moved to the cities to do specific things for a limited duration' [10]. In this way, Kennan refers to the idea that has been present among conservative thinkers for a long time and was formulated by Edmund Burke, the father of liberal conservatism: that politics is the best field of activity for people who accept their positions because of the sense of duty rather than the exaggerated ego and the intense inclination to exercise power. People of this kind do not lose their distance to politics and do not become its hostages, because they can always return to their interesting occupations. Thus, they are aware of the measure and borders that are only a pass to sensible political activity, which was already emphasised by the Italian political thinker and politician Gaetano Mosca in the 20th century [11]. Model examples of such responsible statesmen are already provided by ancient Rome. Kennan himself indicates General George Marshall and George Washington as people of this kind.

Apart from that, it is worth noting that the statement of more convincing values and better tastes of people living in the 18th century testifies to Kennan's elitarism. What becomes visible, is his dislike for the phenomenon that is defined as the revolt of the masses according to José Ortega y Gasset [12]. Not going deeper into details, we can indicate that the clearest expression of elitarism of the author of *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* is his concept of creation of intellectual aristocracy through selected universities where people capable of top-level disciplined work would study. Kennan leaves no doubt that only few people are able to meet this challenge.

Kennan and the big city

In light of what has already been said, it is not surprising that Kennan expresses a scathing criticism of big urban agglomerations. Again, he does not think it is possible to eliminate them from the American landscape. However, life in them seems terrifying to him, and there is little chance of living in a civilised manner there. It is not only a matter of environment pollution, although big city wastes generate a huge problem. Kennan generally questions the functioning of the human being in

monstrously big population centres. He blames the mass development of the automobile industry for the incredible expansion of cities. Until the development of cities was based on rail transport, they were smaller and much more concentrated. The author of *American Diplomacy* expresses his nostalgia for 19th-century London, Edinburgh, Berlin or Chicago [13]. However, the emergence of cars on a mass scale led to the dispersion of cities over dozens or hundreds of square kilometres. The present-day paradox of this situation is that, although the car itself is responsible for the expansion of cities in all directions, it is becoming increasingly useless in big urban areas. Thus, it is not the exhaustion of fuel resources, as Kennan supposed, but enormous traffic jams in big cities that lead to the diminishing importance of cars, with the underground rapid transit system being the only effective means of transport. If it were not for the underground railroad, life in metropolises would become virtually impossible due to the necessity of long-distance travel. All of this contributes to the increasingly common belief that the possession of a car in a big urban agglomeration is a nuisance because of costs of use and parking. Thus, it should not be very surprising that young people from big cities of Western Europe, for whom the possession of a car ceased to be a reflection of social prestige a long time ago, very often resign from its purchase at all.

According to Kennan, the tool that destroys rural and small-town life is television. Without going into details, it is easy to notice the mechanism by means of which television eliminates rural life in the social sense of the word. This happens because urban lifestyle is promoted as something desirable and natural in various productions and advertisements. In other words, the impact of television creates urban behaviour models that are willingly adopted by young people from smaller centres. In this way, big urban centres dictate trends that are readily taken up and imitated by small urban centres and villages. It must be emphasised that Kennan generally perceives the advertising industry as a fundamental evil that 'pollutes the entire content of information that flows back and forth in the country. It debauches and misuses the intelligence of the listener and viewer; it de-trains people for any sustained attention to the truth' [14].

Beliefs expressed by Kennan in various places and on various occasions indicate undoubtedly that he would agree with Jefferson's famous statement that big cities are fatal to human health, morality and freedom. In light of what has already been said, it should be clear why they are fatal to health. It would only be necessary to explain why they pose a threat to human morality and freedom. There are many reasons that could be identified. However, I would like to focus only on one reason that, in my view, touches the essence of Kennan's conservative political philosophy. This essence is responsibility. In other words, Kennan supports everything that increases the ability of the human being to assume responsibility for himself, whereas everything that releases the human being from responsibility has a harmful effect on civilisation. 'In Western culture – says Kennan – the churches have kept their eses on the moral responsibility of the individual in the face of his own conscience. This is not to be taken for granted. It is absent from Chinese-Confucian concept of religiosity where there is no sin, only indiscretion or impracticability. But in the West, both in the traditions of Christianity and Judaism, we have been brought up to feel individual responsibility. There is, in the United States, no one to hold people to that today – the churches have lost the power to do so, the state cannot attempt to do so, and our two political parties would not know how to begin to do so. They cater to what is basest in the American electorate' [15]. How does attachment to the category of responsibility manifest itself in Kennan's analysis? Looking at issues of big politics, it is easy to notice the central place of responsibility in Kennan's thinking, for instance, with regard to the issue of the protective umbrella provided to Europe by the United States. The thinker's isolationistic viewpoint in this matter originates from the question whether Europe does not have sufficient population and material resources to build a European army by itself and take care of its own safety? The American diplomat believes that Europeans have all necessary resources to create such an army. It is the American protection that allows Europeans to abdicate from responsibility and focus on the purely material, if not hedonistic, aspect of life. 'We have been a form of escape for our European allies. (...) A gradual American withdrawal, and a gradual assumption of much greater responsibilities by the West Europeans for what is, after all, principally their own defence and political future would be all to the good' [16]. Naturally, I do not intend to argue with Kennan's isolationistic attitude and quote arguments justifying Americans' presence in Europe. I only wish to present the category of

responsibility as the central category of his political thinking. Departing from issues of big politics and focusing on the micro scale and the issue of the big city, it is easy to notice that it is exactly the big city – or, more precisely, anonymousness created within it – that often allows the human being to discard responsibility. Melting in the crowd, the human being undertakes behaviours that he would not dare to show if he knew that he is devoid of anonymousness. This is where we can see the advantage of a local urban or rural community over a big urban agglomeration when we consider the issue of promotion or reinforcement of behaviours consistent with moral and legal principles. Jefferson's statement that the big city constitutes a threat to human morality becomes sufficiently understandable, and Kennan would have certainly subscribed to it.

The category of responsibility can also be used for explaining how an assault on human freedom is made within a big urban area. After all, responsibility is a prerequisite for human subjectivity and dignity. A human being who is unwilling or unable to accept responsibility for his own acts cancels his own subjectivity and violates his own dignity. The category of freedom is also inseparably connected with responsibility - at least from the conservative viewpoint adopted by Kennan. Freedom without responsibility leads to an abuse of freedom and anarchy, which eventually results in an eruption of violence. This is why Kennan states very strongly that the total demoralisation and degeneration of urban areas is America's most striking failure [17]. He finds this particularly pessimistic in light of the fact that many societies in various regions of the world follow America's model.

Democracy vs. care of the natural environment

Kennan's works are filled with concern about the capacity of American democracy. Obviously, the aim of this paper is not to provide an in-depth analysis of the democratic system in the American thinker's view. Our attention focuses mainly on the question to what extent American democracy is able to protect the natural environment effectively. As for the functioning of the democratic regime in the USA, we can only risk the general statement that Kennan questions the possibilities of solving the most important problems of the dynamically changing world within its framework. This happens for many reasons, but one of the most essential factors is the fact that American democracy was originally not designed for huge urban areas and spaces. 'The tragedy is that neither our political institutions nor our inherited values have been adequate to the demands of the great city,' [18] says Kennan. We can assume that this statement reflects the belief that is constantly expressed by conservatists: that the democratic system functions properly in small and culturally cohesive communities. The Greek *polis* or Swiss cantons are its proper environment. On the other hand, managing a large country such as the USA within the democratic system must result in the continuous need to search for and work out a compromise in certain burning issues. This causes a lack of consistency both in foreign policy and internal affairs. Moreover, the abandonment of further devastation of the natural environment is regarded by all people assuming an ecological point of view as a case that should be made clear in an uncompromising manner. In American democracy, as well as in any other democracy, the protection of the environment through the shutdown of a factory employing hundreds of people often creates very serious tensions. Today, on the one hand, politicians cannot remain indifferent to the devastation of nature and the contamination of the air; on the other hand, they are far from protecting them in a dogmatic and fundamental manner. They realise perfectly that they will receive votes in the next election not from trees, but from citizens, including those dismissed from the factory. Obviously, ecological issues went far beyond local structures a long time ago. They are nationwide and global issues. Because of the nationwide dimension of ecological issues, politicians often decide to shut down the plants that are industrial polluters. In such cases, they count not on the local votes that they will not receive, but on votes of citizens from other regions of the country who have not lost their jobs and who want to enjoy the clean air and water. Therefore, Kennan's pessimism as to the effective handling of the issue of environment devastation by democracy seems exaggerated today. Kennan says: 'we shall have to come to grips with the ecological luster of problems. These contain no popular materials for electioneering purposes. In fact, any political party that did, out of a sense of public duty, pin them to its banner would be courting certain disaster, for it would have to ask for a high sense of self-discipline and self-sacrifice to avert certain catastrophes which are not visible to the naked eye. I can

see no political party mustering sufficient integrity to do this. For example, it may well be that we shall have to throttle our agriculture back to a point where we don't use great amounts of chemical fertilisers. Well, it would take bayonets to force the farmers to accept this. But in many other areas, too, there will be an incontrovertible need to impose an absolutely merciless discipline' [19]. In Kennan's eyes, the inability of democratic parties to tackle ecological issues seriously is generally related to the fact that they cannot raise issues of highest significance if their goal is to win the next election. The most serious issues require long-term and resolute actions and, in many cases, the contradiction of prevalent opinions. They also involve the need to formulate requirements towards citizens and change their habits. It is difficult to hope that political parties will choose the way that is extremely risky from the political point of view. This seems possible only as a result of the unavoidable pressure of an emergency. With regard to ecological issues, parties in the democratic system find it difficult to acknowledge - as in the case of rebellious students at campuses at the end of the 1960s – that 'a concerted effort to restore something of the balance and purity and strength of natural environment might be one of the ways in which men could work together without invoking those aspects of political and commercial competition which lead to wars, or fears of wars, and exploitation, or suspicions of exploitation' [20].

References

[1] D.P. Moynihan, *Introduction*, in: *Encounter with Kennan: The Great Debate*, London 1979, p. VII.

[2] Cf. X (G.F. Kennan), *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, [in:] "Foreign Affairs", July 1947.

[3] For example, in an interview given in April 1996, Kennan talked about a misunderstanding caused by his article, because 'I said that wherever these people, meaning the Soviet leadership, confronted us with dangerous hostility anywhere in the world, we should do everything possible to contain it and not let them expand any further. I should have explained that I didn't suspect them of any desire to launch an attack on us. This was right after the war, and it was absurd to suppose that they were going to turn around and attack the United States. I didn't think I needed to explain that, but I obviously should have done it'. https://ows.edb.utexas.edu/site/why-vietnam/george-kennan, access: 20.04.2016. To read more about inconsistencies in Kennan's position, see: L. Labedz, *Two Minds of George Kennan*, [in:] "Encounter", April 1978, pp. 78-85 and id., *A Last Critique On Kennan's Warnings*, [in:] "Encounter", April 1978, pp. 32-34. The same issue of "Encounter" contains a criticism of Kennan by Richard Pipes.

[4] G.F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950*, Boston 1967, p. 294.

[5] *Encounter with...*, p. 5-6.

[6] Ibid., p. 4.

[7] G.F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1950-1963*, quoted after: *Encounter with...*, p. 5.

[8] G.F. Kennan, *Democracy and the Student Left*, Boston 1968, p. 143.

[9] *Encounter with...*, p. 4.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Cf. G. Mosca, *History of Political Doctrines. From Ancient to Modern Times*, Polish translation by S. Kozicki, Warsaw, no release year, p. 93.

[12] Cf. J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, Polish translation by P. Niklewicz (*Bunt mas*), Warsaw 1995.

[13] Cf. *Encounters with...*, p. 6.

[14] Ibid., p. 16.

[15] Ibid., p. 11.

[16] Ibid., p. 19.

[17] Ibid., p. 7.

[18] Ibid., p. 8.

[19] Ibid., p. 31.

[20] G.F. Kennan, *Democracy and the Student*..., p. 144.