

Book review(s)

Neo-radical perspectives on global environmental governance?

James Gustav Speth (ed.) *Worlds Apart: Globalization and the Environment* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003), pp. ix–180. ISBN 1-55963-999-7.

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Seen by some only decades ago as of peripheral concern extremism, “environmentalism” has become mainstream, and, with limited exception, nowadays there seems little opposition to the idea that the global environment is undergoing change at a magnitude and rate higher than at any time in human history not as a result of cataclysmic events but largely as the unintended and cumulative result of ordinary economic activity.¹ Important to the mainstreaming of environmental concern has been the widespread uptake of the concept of sustainable development as a principle in both international environmental law and much domestic environmental policy. This concept, or at least its Brundtland formulation, holds that economic growth is the solution to the problems it creates provided it meets standards of environmental protection, recognizes the import of poverty alleviation, and respects the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. However, the “paradox” is that, at a time when sustainable development discourses, policy, and practice have become the commonplace, depletion of key resources and ecological destruction are said to have continued to increase at an alarming rate.

Analysis of this situation frequently apportions a good deal of responsibility to global economic liberalization, or (narrowly seen) “globalization,”² and to the concept of sustainable development itself: by making “reformed” economic growth central to attaining sustainability, the manner in which growth’s destructive relation to the ecology (and society) may be structural (hence inherent to growth) is eclipsed. Consequently, it appears essential that critical appraisal of both developments is made to avoid mistaking

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a merely apparent paradox of having more sustainable development yet more destruction for a real one.

It is in light of a relative dearth of, on the one hand, critical examination of the relationship between sustainable development and globalization and, on the other, proposals for viable forms of global environmental governance that Speth’s compilation *Worlds Apart* seeks to make a timely contribution. *Worlds Apart* is certainly ambitious, offering “a lucid analysis of the gaps in the current global governance system and compelling policy guidance” (reverse cover). Contributions from “experts and environmental leaders” cover the transition of the globalized economy to a sustainable society (Speth), prospects for a new paradigm of, and legal mechanism for, global environmental governance (M. Strong and Esty/Ivanova, respectively), critical energy issues for sustainable development (Goldemberg), indicators for sustainability (Lubchenko), market opportunities for alleviating socioenvironmental crises (Kates), business prospects for sustainable forestry (Schmidheiny), and environmental critiques of, and democratic alternatives to, global economic liberalization (J. Mander and V. Shiva, respectively).

On the question of requisite global environmental governance, the contributors generally divide between those who consider globalization, narrowly understood, a central factor in the escalation of environmental crises, and those who consider it though problematic capable of such reform that “sustainable development” aims may be achieved. Although both camps convincingly present the case for revision of present governance arrangements, in citing different causes for ecological destruction and depletion, unsurprisingly both advocate different governance solutions.

Tracing causes of many ecological crises to overpopulation and, hence, overconsumption amplified by certain technologies (or as Kates puts it: degradation = population × consumption), “qualified” globalization proponents argue that the 500 or so international environmental agreements currently in force are insufficient to counter major threats to the atmosphere, oceans, and biota and that such agreements are frequently mutually antagonistic. Proponents accordingly present the case, first, for a kind of supranational

harmonizer, arbiter, and enforcer of international environmental law — a “global environmental governance mechanism” (GEM), to instigate, if current cycles of global environmental decline are to be arrested, a move away from “principles and declarations” and toward “concrete devices... to alter incentives.” By “draw[ing] on an established set of private” and public organizations, its advocates argue that the GEM would “set the agenda, analyze, formulate, and implement [international environmental] policy” and oversee and administer environmental compliance (Esty/Ivanova). Second, proponents argue that regulation, policy, and practice need to focus more, and more effectively, on overpopulation, overconsumption, and related causes of contemporary crises. Third, if we are to meet the “growth in [for example] energy consumption” (Goldemberg), proponents make the case for advancing nationally and through international programmes and cooperation sustainable technologies, particularly for energy. Fourth, Lubchenko thoughtfully argues that efforts toward this sustainability ought to go hand in hand with an extensive raising of ecological and scientific literacy among the public at large.

To thread the first three points together, proponents broadly agree with the view that “to find a pathway to a sustainable future, we must first do so within the new context that global markets and economies have established” (Speth), and that, because of their “great dynamism, . . . market forces are clearly the best method of introducing . . . change [e.g., in consumption] if properly guided by regulation” (Goldemberg).

To make sense of this endorsement of a broadly neo-liberal Brundtland perspective, it is necessary to understand proponents’ characterization of globalization. Here globalization is shorthand, for example, for an “interconnectedness” of global trade of truly “ancient” origins (Kates), which by “living off nature’s income, . . . took all of history to grow” (Speth). Construed as an ahistorical and largely inevitable process, tools to remedy the excesses of globalization are to be found in existing growth-based regulation and market opportunities. Because this characterization seemingly admits no alternative, it is by means of such tools that globalization may be redirected to a point where it “will actually help solve environmental problems because,” for example, “of a predicted decline in poverty . . .” (Speth, Kates, Goldemberg).

It is at this point that early suspicions are confirmed that the usual Panglossian neoclassical complacency regarding “growing our way out of problems” appears recycled with thin green camouflage. Typically, on the issue of poverty, to take one concern, it might be queried how seeking solutions to environmental problems within the market context might eradicate impoverishment. If solutions are to be profitable, they may by definition exclude the poor, and if they are to be made accessible to low-income sectors, they are unlikely to be profitable and, hence, risk remaining undeveloped for lack of private investment. One might also wonder why proponents should choose to ignore conclusions of old debates on impoverishment, such as the notion that “growth reduces relative poverty” is one that, because a key means of propelling economic growth lies in the maintenance of inequality through the ceaseless arrival of new commodities just beyond the means of the majority (creating new demand and new markets), risks accusations to a large extent of missing the point.³ The connections between growth, technological innovation, and the intergenerational distribution of unpredictable harms through the increasing temporal reach (or “timeprint”) of advanced technologies also remain unaddressed issues.^{4, 5}

Equally surprising is the sense that the contributing proponents of globalization seem to demonstrate little recognition of widely discussed questionable assumptions and methodologies of orthodox economic theory.⁶ On the contrary, some proponents exhibit them. Schmidheiny, the founder of what has become the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, argues that “less environmental damage” is a “benefit”: Genetically engineering trees to produce less lignin means that less energy and fewer chemicals are required to extract the cellulose — “a great environmental benefit.” Rebranding less harm as a benefit makes sense only if damage infliction (i.e., economic growth) is deemed the norm and mitigation in need of justification, an assumption analogously made in Speth’s conclusion on the Johannesburg (Rio+10) Summit, 2002. Despite its disappointments, Speth regards one of the Summit’s more notable outcomes to be that “we agree to halve by the year 2015 . . . the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation” thereby implicitly accepting the avoidable suffering of the other half for at least up until 2015, an expediency that for some would border on complicity. Although such a view may,

of course, be a mere slip of the tongue, variations on the same questionable growth-based thinking continue to be taken seriously, such as the findings of the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit that what Africa needs is more pollution — on grounds that it needs more “development” to be able to afford the environment.

Some insight into proponents’ less than critical adherence to orthodox economic/Brundtlandesque doctrine may be gleaned from their loose definition of globalization. To present globalization ahistorically by characterizing it as an “interconnectedness of global trade of ancient origins” offers no basis with which to account for the distinctly modern forms in which socioecological crises can be escalated. Environmental degradation and depletion may well involve critical problems of population and consumption, but “living off nature’s income” to this effect (construing degradation as consumption \times population) renders institutional and related causes of degradation invisible or at least “natural.” This thereby obliterates the possibility of identifying, say, coercive and ideological social relations implicated in the modern drive to overconsume. Framing environmental problems in terms that render causes somehow “natural,” rather than “social,” risks legitimating by extending the fiction that global economic liberalization is inevitable and admits of no alternative. Such thinking departs from a critical appraisal of globalization and, moreover, makes growth-based policy solutions appear self-evident and rational.

Indeed, one of the conditions for the expansion of global capitalism, and one that has long preoccupied critical social theorists, is the presentation of capital’s tendency of (predatory) expansion and divergence as a natural phenomenon (mystification). This condition concerns essentially how “culture becomes nature.” Where globalization is understood as a rhetorical device invoked by governments to justify a seemingly voluntary surrender of power to financial markets, far from being the inevitable result of the growth of foreign trade, growing global inequality and the retrenchment of social policies characteristic of globalization can be seen to be chiefly the result of domestic political decisions with the aim of effect of rebalancing class forces in favor of the owners of capital.⁷

On this view, growth-based policies — be they Brundtlandesque or otherwise — fail to question, let alone abate, the voluntary surrender of power to the

“market.” On the contrary, policies risk endorsing the concentration of power over key resources in the hands of the few and risks failing to resolve the problems they claim to address. If economic growth’s relation to our ecology is inherently destructive, then by definition no growth-based policy will help.

The problem of presuming market sovereignty extends to other proposals in *Worlds Apart*. The global environmental governance mechanism proposed to arbitrate, enforce, and promote international environmental law would appear itself to be governed by no principles. In fact, standard procedural principles of *inter alia* transparency, plurality, and inclusion aside, its authors eschew them in favor of “concrete devices and mechanisms.” Yet where there is conflict, choices must be made, and such choices require prioritizing some principles over others. Although the authors’ preference to avoid thorny philosophical issues in favor of “political bargaining” is entirely understandable given their frustration with the oft-cited inconsistencies and inadequacies of current international environmental governance, it would seem good to remember the dictum that principle without practice is impotent and practice without principle is blind. Indeed, one might add that practice without principle may also be dangerous. For, as is argued elsewhere,⁸ eschewal of questions of principles in the face of global crises is effectively to accept a “guesswork” approach of “the market” to the resolution of crises (referred to by Hayek as a “spontaneous” order) — moderated in this case by the principles of sustainable development, an approach that ultimately assumes that resolution to the problems we face is going to happen by accident. To merely suggest a more uniform way of governing such guesswork is of itself no substantive answer to the mounting dangers and damage generated by permitted market sovereignty.

Avoidance of questions of principle is also a commonly cited problem of the Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. By effectively asking national representatives “by how much do you want to reduce your emissions” rather than “by how much and how quickly do we need to reduce our emissions in order at least to avoid climate destabilisation,” the Kyoto Protocol has come to prioritize prevailing business-as-usual guesswork over politico-scientific realism. The assumption that resolution of climate change will occur within the market context,

which has largely generated it, has served to reinforce stand-offs between nations over emissions reductions since the protocol's inception. It is in this respect that, somewhat surprising to note in his assessment of the protocol, Strong (who coestablished the Rio Earth Summit which gave rise to the UNFCCC) should choose to avoid mention that the protocol's partiality of including only rich nations, its lack of compelling principles by which requisite emissions reductions may be secured, and its subsequent guesswork business-as-usual approach to emissions reductions — which taken together have self-defeatingly confined negotiations to areas that make “economic sense” to do so — may have anything to do with Western nations' efforts falling lamentably short of the UNFCCC's mandate to “avoid dangerous climate change.”

Given his support for a new paradigm for global environmental governance, it is similarly surprising that Strong and others should choose to avoid mention of what appears the sole viable framework solution to climate change offered to date, Contraction and Convergence (C&C), developed by the Global Commons Institute (GCI).⁹ GCI has long argued that the climatic destabilization of society represents in large part a trade-off by some countries of their assumed right to growth against others' actual right to be free from harm including threats to survival, which is compromised by the emission of excessive greenhouse gases (GHG) from the production of that growth. A problem increasingly facing governments of overpolluting countries, however, is that this economic growth would appear to be generating a threat to their own security from which they alone appear not to possess any solutions. Indeed, insurance leaders' account of the current financial impact alone shows that the costs of global weather-related damage are rising exponentially by approximately 10% pa, and should this continue, as it shows every sign of doing, within two generations, the damage costs from production may equal the global wealth generated at 3% pa by that production.¹⁰ Clearly, a global solution is required. Because such a solution to the climate threat from which no one is immune requires global agreement, the necessary condition for the possibility of which is recognition of the equal right to survive, recognition of equity becomes an argument for survival.

GCI quantifies the “equity for survival” argument through the elegantly simple full-term framework

policy of Contraction and Convergence: (a) the contraction of each nations' GHG emissions to an atmospheric concentration and at a rate consistent with the UNFCCC's mandate to avoid dangerous climate change (precaution); and (b) the convergence of GHG emissions from status quo to equal per capita shares by an agreed date (equity). Although not entirely unproblematic,¹¹ some of the relevance of C&C to the kinds of governance considerations that preoccupy Strong, Esty, and Ivanova derives from the idea that, if global solutions are by default constitutional, accepting C&C may enshrine in order: principles of precaution and equity, with orthodox economists' version of “efficiency,” recalibrated to include measurement of the transition of prosperity from hydrocarbon (fossil fuels) to carbohydrate and other sources. Consideration could perhaps be given to how this de facto constitutional template for the per capita equal right to the use of the global (atmospheric) commons within limits that are safe for all could serve as a framework within which the GEM might function as effectively as its authors intend.

While effective global “environmental” governance requires consideration of issues other than those addressed by C&C, should it nonetheless succeed the Kyoto Protocol, it would at least encourage the view that viable solutions to global problems require a shift from guesswork to framework and that frameworks derive from compelling, coherent, and quantifiable politico-ethical principles. In so far as global economic liberalization has played an unquestionable role in the generation and escalation of global problems, any framework approach would also do well to consider Dewey's association of governance by private power with the demise of substantive democracy. “Politics,” Dewey argued, “is the shadow cast on society by big business,” and as long as this remains so, “the attenuation of the shadow will not change its substance.”¹² In other words, political reform be it toward sustainability or otherwise, are likely to remain of limited utility. Democracy requires that the source of the shadow be removed since the very institution of private power undermines democracy. Power today, Dewey continues, “resides in control of the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation and communication — whoever rules them rules the life of the country.”¹³ Accordingly, until “business for private profit through private control of banking, land,

industry, reinforced by command of the...means of publicity and propaganda” — the system of power favored by domestic political decisions under the rhetoric of “globalization” — is dismantled, we cannot talk seriously about democracy.

Socioecological critiques of “globalization” sensitive to this view (Mander) and which promote democratic alternatives (Shiva), therefore, are healthy inclusions in *Worlds Apart*. Mander presents a useful historical outline of the institutional changes leading to the present state of affairs, argues that some environmental problems are intrinsic to the operational matrix of global capitalism, and, although he does not advance his a programme to replace it, makes clear that opposition to globalization is growing and that democratic input can change it. Shiva’s prime concern is with people — those whose lives and livelihoods are damaged and destroyed by the march of the corporate version of globalization. Shiva builds on Mander’s view that a discernible shift among the public to a more critical perspective on this globalization is taking place, and propounds the need for new democratic governance, a “living democracy...based on local communities and empowered people...to bring a balance between commerce, ecology and social and political equity.”

Common to Mander and Shiva’s critiques of “globalization” is the belief that, because “local and regional production for regional consumption is...extremely subversive of free trade, economic globalization and corporate hypergrowth, which all depend upon maximizing economic processes” (Mander), local, decentralized systems form, if not the answer, then at least a key part of it. Small may well be beautiful, but it is not at all clear how what in effect includes small-scale capitalism can achieve “living democracy” while it avoids a coherent challenge to the issue over private ownership of key resources that preoccupied Dewey.

A further issue is the extent to which Mander and Shiva are actually providing a critique at all. If by critique it is understood to be a compelling opposition set within a viable proposition, then by merely listing otherwise useful proposals that lack real compulsion and coherence, it is difficult to shake off the sense that both offer merely criticisms akin to the “wish list” form of advocacy common to some mainstream campaigning nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Criticism of

those who may inadvertently fail to provide viable solutions is of course not to be limited to Mander and Shiva. The task of transforming globalization and renewing democracy by *inter alia* coherently and compellingly advocating and effecting alternative ownership regimes in key resources in response to otherwise intractable problems generated by prevailing forms of governance, seems to militate against an intellectual climate of timidity where reluctance to propose solutions appears surpassed perhaps only by that to meaningfully address causes of ongoing climate-mediated harms. Given this situation, it is heartening to witness the likes of GCI’s and others’ policy research within which in some measure “sustainability,” in any meaningful sense of the word, may be achieved.

Given the corporate version of much globalization and the escalation of global ecological crises,¹⁴ that the “experts and environmental leaders” assembled in this volume should respond in an essentially piecemeal, partial and unconvincing manner renders *Worlds Apart* vulnerable to the suspicion that it may in fact be a distraction from, and thus would appear a part of, the problems, merely disguised as “radical perspectives.” Doubtless contributors are well meaning, but they simply have not looked at the problems well enough and, thus, overwhelmingly, are pushing quite deficient remedies.

Global problems almost invariably require global solutions, and this, in the main, means some kind of framework; anything less risks assuming that resolution of global problems is going to happen by accident. To be a “solution,” initiatives must at minimum avoid perpetuating “structural” causes of socioecological decline (e.g., following Dewey, liberal private ownership of key resources) and to be coherent, efforts toward framework ought to address the context within which problems arise. To be effective, they must do so in a way that advances an expressly “principled” framework faster than the existing guesswork of unbounded market principles is contributing to the problem, and to be efficient, tactical use of, rather than weak collusion with, prevailing structures, relations, and institutions ought to be considered.

By obfuscating precisely those areas that require illumination and demystification, *Worlds Apart* arguably obscures causes and viable resolution of continued destruction and predation and ultimately serves as a useful indication of why, after over 50 years of

activism, research and international agreements, the problems are getting worse. Indeed, from viable solutions to the precarious state of our planet, *Worlds Apart* is, with limited exception, sadly precisely that.

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