

BOOKS

Growth without blight

The Bridge at the Edge of the World

by James Gustave Speth. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, 295 pp.

Sheldon Krinsky

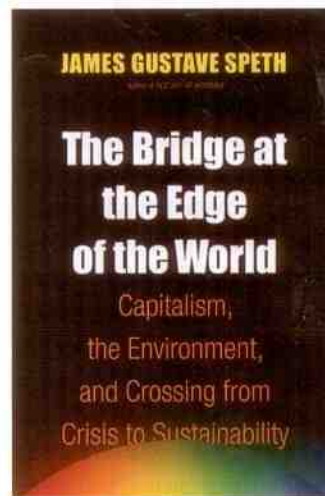
In November 2008, Al Gore authored an op-ed essay in the *New York Times* titled “The Climate for Change” in which he offered a five-part plan for how we can save the economy and the environment at the same time. For half a century, political economists and environmentalists of all stripes have been seeking the solution to a world order in which economics was in balance with ecology. In what appears to be an inexorable degradation of global ecosystems and more recently the near collapse of national economies, with no appreciable abatement in greenhouse gases, the problems addressed by Gore have reached a precarious state.

Many sectarian solutions have been proposed to resolve the deadlock between economy and ecology. Free marketers contend that it is a matter of getting the prices right and internalizing externalities. We are all free riders who are not paying for the despoliation of nature from our pollution. Regulation proponents argue that we need better laws and stronger enforcement.

Neo-anarchists and bioregionalists believe that we cannot achieve sustainable societies until we plan our communities according to proper scale and principles of self-sufficiency. Eco-radicals maintain that population and economic growth must be limited by the ecological constraints of the planet and that the protection of ecosystems that sustain our lives must receive the highest priority. Egalitarian social ecologists remind us that the responsibility for protecting the biosphere falls heavily on the nations that have contributed the most to the planet’s environmental threats and those economies that have already benefited the most from their exploitation of natural resources.

In *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, James Gustave (Gus) Speth has given us a fresh look at the question of reconciling economy with ecology. Speth is not shy about probing deep into the structural conditions that lie at the heart of the problem. His contribution is unique because Speth has for years worked as an environmental reformer who has taken for granted that good laws, sound stewardship, honest environmental accounting, and strong federal leadership will make a difference. Currently the dean at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Speth was cofounder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, chairman of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality, founder and president of the World Resources Institute, and administrator of the UN Development Program.

When Speth addressed the “root causes” of environmental problems in his earlier book, *Red Sky at Morning*, the focus was on honest prices, ecological technologies, sustainable consumption, and environmental education. He hasn’t abandoned these ideas, but he has reached the conclusion that they do not go deep enough into the problem.



In seeking to understand the structural conditions associated with industrial societies’ uncontrollable appetite for natural resources and unsustainable growth, Speth has dared to raise the “C” word, long viewed as the province of radical economists, Marxist sociologists, and communitarian utopians. For Speth, capitalism is both the source of our success as a post-industrial economy and the obstacle to realizing environmental sustainability.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 addresses the global environmental threat and its economic drivers, including the growth imperative. Part 2 provides an analysis of failed efforts to remedy the problem within the framework of neoclassical economics. Part 3 explores the opportunities for the transformation of the current system of market capitalism into a "post-growth" economy.

Speth's analysis is not caught up in a choice among historical "isms"; rather, he says, "I myself have no interest in socialism or economic planning or other paradigms of the past." What he does propose is a reoriented market system that embodies the values of a post-growth society because "the planet cannot sustain capitalism as we know it." His book explores the values and constraints that a transformed political economy must embody.

Every market system functions at two levels. First, there is the legal, ethical, and regulatory matrix on which all business and human activities are expected to operate. These include the system of government incentives, research investments, taxes, and environmental laws. Second, there are the free market functions (business transactions, consumer choices) that are overlaid on the matrix. To use a computer metaphor, the political economy has an operating system (the underlying matrix) and a system of programs (markets) whose deep structure conforms to the operating system. In Speth's view, the underlying matrix on which the market system operates needs reconfiguration if the economy and ecology are to become harmonized. In his words, "Today's dominant world view is simply too biased toward anthropocentrism, materialism, egocentrism, contempocentrism, reductionism, rationalism, and nationalism to sustain the changes needed."

More than a quarter century ago, the environmental sociologist Allan Schnaiberg introduced the concept of the "treadmill of production." According to Schnaiberg, industrial capitalism is driven by higher rates of material throughput, which eventually creates so much waste (additions) and extracts so much of the earth's natural resources (withdrawals) that it overwhelms the biosphere. Both Schnaiberg and Speth reach the same conclusion. There is only so much that can be done to slow down the biophysical throughput by recycling, green consumerism, and green technologies.

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The resolution between the capitalism of unfettered growth and a planet with limited natural resources and assimilative capacity can be found in the composition of the gross domestic product. And Speth zeroes in on this economic construct. He doesn't argue that we have to eliminate growth; rather, we have to change its character. We need a new evolved form of capitalism that creates incentives for non-material growth, an economy that reverses the tendency to produce too many useless, redundant, and ecologically damaging consumer goods that effectively turn too many people into polluters.

If we were to draw two columns, the first listing what our current economy produces in abundance and a second indicating the scarcities we face, we might have a clue to what post-market capitalism would look like. Observes Speth, "Basically, the economic system does not work when it comes to protecting environmental resources, and the political system does not work when it comes to protecting the economic system." His optimism is also evident. "As it has in the past, capitalism will evolve, and it may evolve into a new species altogether." Speth reaches

his conclusions judiciously, after navigating through a thorny intellectual landscape that includes all the major inspirational voices, the environmental sages of our age. His careful examination of a variety of solutions reveals how each is either insufficient or leads to a dead end.

Returning to Schnaiberg's analysis in his 1980 book, *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity*, he concludes, "If the treadmill is to be slowed and reversed, the central social agency that will have to bring this about is the state, acting to rechannel production surplus in non-treadmill directions. But the state can only do so when there is both a sufficient crisis of faith in the treadmill, and sufficient political support for production apart from the treadmill." Speth reaches a similar conclusion. In his formulation, "The transformation of contemporary capitalism requires far reaching and effective government action. How else can the market be made to work for the environment rather than against it? How else can corporate behavior be altered or programs built that meet real human and social needs?"

When the collapse of major financial institutions and banks occurred in the fall of 2008, the American people were advised by their president to consume to save the economy from cascading into free fall. But there are many ways for people and their government to consume that do not involve speeding up material throughput. We can consume education, provide support for nonprofit organizations that make our neighborhoods and regions better places to live, consume services for the elderly and for our own self-awareness through the arts, and invest in the research and infrastructure that enhances the quality of our lives. Speth applauds those growth scenarios leading to improving "non-material dimen-

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sions of fulfillment.” He also shows us that beyond a certain level of material wealth, increasing material consumption does not correlate with human well being.

This is a book of hope and inspiration. It tells us that we are not locked by default into a particular form of market capitalism that is in its deepest structure unfit for a sustainable world. There are signs that our society is already pregnant with change. What Speth has done, like a good Zen master, is to open our minds to the possibilities of aspiring to human self-realization, societal transformation, and a livable planet without setting limits on economic growth.

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Danger: Bell curve ahead

Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality

by Charles Murray. New York: Crown Forum, 2008.

Michael J. Feuer

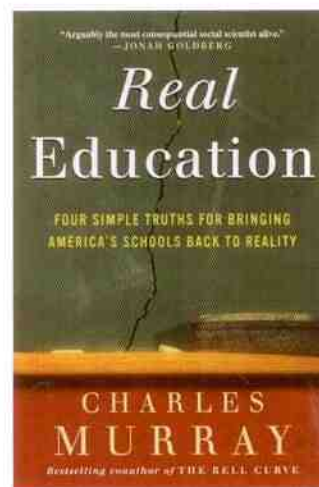
When I was in my junior high-school play, one of the parents in the audience was overheard saying that there were only two things wrong with our performance: The curtain went up, and the seats faced the stage. Similarly, there are only two things wrong with Charles Murray's latest book: The logic is flawed, and the evidence is thin.

Were it not for his claim that his earlier work (*Losing Ground*, 1984) changed the way the nation thought about welfare, there would be little reason to dignify the current polemic with a review in a magazine of the National Academy of Sciences. But on the off chance that Murray's ideas might influence the way the nation thinks about education, it is worth a response even at the risk of affording him undeserved attention.

Here is his basic argument, presented in the form of “four simple truths” and an equally simplistic proposal: Ability varies, half the children are below average, too many people go to college, our future depends on how we educate the academically gifted, and privatization will fix the schools. Space constraints prevent me from undoing the errors of omission and commission in each of these claims, so I'll concentrate on one or two and ask readers to extrapolate from there.

A good place to start is with ability, a complex concept that Murray chooses to simplify by focusing on IQ, which for him captures most of what matters to academic achievement and, for that matter, success in life. IQ is certainly a component of academic ability and a predictor of future performance; on those facts the science is well established. But Murray seems unable or unwilling to acknowledge the preponderance of evidence showing that IQ is only one measure of ability, that it covers only a small subset of what we now understand to mean by intelligence, and it is neither the sole nor the most important correlate of adult success. The observation (simple truth no. 2) that it varies in the population is utterly banal, but Murray unabashedly uses it as a building block for his core argument: Let's stop wasting our time with children at the low end of the ability continuum, concentrate our resources on

those whose IQ scores suggest they can handle rigorous intellectual material, encourage the remaining 80 to 90% to become electricians and plumbers, and stop clogging our colleges and universities with people who don't have (and will almost certainly never develop) what it takes to benefit from a liberal education.



Murray correctly anticipates that this radical proposal might invite criticism, so he launches an early preemptive strike: “As soon as I move beyond that simplest two-word expression, *ability varies*, controversy begins.” Well, not quite. Everyone knows that ability varies, and thanks to Garrison Keillor (and introductory statistics courses), almost everyone knows that half the children have to be below average. The controversy begins when Murray moves from that truism to this mischievous accusation: “Educators who proceed on the assumption that they can find some ability in which every child is above average [sic] are kidding themselves.” This statement warrants some unpacking.

First, where is the evidence that this is what educators assume? When teachers work with children to improve their