

James Gustave Speth: *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*

New Haven, CT, 2008: Yale University Press, 320 pp.

In the wake of the failure to achieve a binding international agreement on climate change at the 2009 Copenhagen conference, many environmentalists have been left groping for a way forward and looking for solutions to the pressing ecological issues of our day. In this book James Speth provides his own assessment of the causes of environmental problems and prescriptions for solving them. Speth presents a comprehensive analysis of the ailments afflicting both Mother Earth and the contemporary environmental social movement, focusing his analysis on developed nations such as the USA, Europe, and Japan and outlining a holistic response to the global environmental crisis. As the 'grand old man' of American and international environmental policy, having worked in government, the non-profit sector, and academia, Speth is uniquely experienced to comment on today's problems and explain the historical context of how they came to be. Speth co-founded the National Resources Defense Council in 1970, chaired President Jimmy Carter's Council on Environmental Quality, and in 1982 founded the World Resources Institute (WRI). From 1993 to 1999 he headed the United Nations Development Program, and until recently served as the dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. The book is a thoughtful reflection on lessons learned during this long career.

Without being polemic or sounding like a radical Marxist, Speth argues that the main contemporary environmental problem is capitalism itself. And the solution is a 'no-growth' society with new priorities that emphasise quality of life and sustainable development. The author divides his analysis into three sections. The first part

of the book is called 'System Failure'. It documents the seriousness of local and global crises including climate change, deforestation, desertification, fisheries depletion, biodiversity loss, and toxic pollution. Paradoxically, environmental quality is getting worse despite the institutionalisation of environmentalism as a social movement, the creation of state environmental protection agencies, and, in some countries, even the electoral success of Green parties.

Why has modern US environmentalism failed to reverse the trends in global ecological destruction? Speth identifies seven main reasons: (1) mainstream environmental groups believe the problems can and should be addressed within the existing political-economic system, even to the point of cooperation with corporations; (2) the movement today tends to emphasise being 'pragmatic and incrementalist', often attempting to deal with problems one at a time; (3) greens tend to focus more on effects rather than on the underlying causes of problems; (4) they believe problems can be solved without significant lifestyle changes or threats to economic growth; (5) they see solutions as coming out of the environmental sector, not in collaboration with other interest groups; (6) environmentalism has become so professionalised that it does not engage in political or grassroots activism; and (7) the movement often entrusts action to large state bureaucracies with faith that the government will do the right thing (pp. 69–70). Speth concludes, 'The methods and style of today's environmentalism are not wrongheaded, just far too restricted as an overall approach' (p. 81). The results of this decades-long approach have included the deepening of global ecological crises, waning public concern for ecological issues, and an increase in the power of business interests to influence policy. Speth gives an interesting example of how even the best-intentioned environmentalism cannot deal adequately with current challenges, explaining the dilemma of 'regulatory slippage' in this way:

What if a regulation covered 80 percent of the problem, and 80 percent of those regulated tried to comply, and 80 percent of that effort was successful? Oops, $0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8$: [The US Environmental Protection Agency] just missed 50 percent of the problem. And the problem is growing, driven as we have seen by economic expansion. If a regulation controls 50 percent of an effluent but the sources producing effluents double in size, pollution is right where it was before the regulation. (p. 84)

According to Speth, the incremental, pragmatic, and compromising problem-solving strategies attempted by environmental advocates both inside and outside of government have not worked for the last couple of decades. The only success is that in some areas, 'things are getting worse at a slower rate' (p. 51). Speth concludes that a dramatic transformation of capitalism – especially its primary institution, the corporation – is needed. His experience has led him to conclude, 'Working only within the system will, in the end, not succeed when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself' (p. 86). This transformative, outside-the-system change is partly value-based – such as the rejection of blind faith in the free market and infinite economic growth – and partly institutional, such as the legal redefinition of the corporation and the revitalisation of participatory democracy. To illustrate, while the greening of personal consumption by purchasing more eco-friendly products may be helpful, the real solution is reduction of our overall consumption. This entails a rejection of the consumerist ethos and economy that have come to define modern life.

In part two of the book, entitled 'The Great Transformation', Speth details his alternative vision of social, economic, and political relations. According to the author, capitalism is a highly effective engine of economic growth, which at one point in human history served a positive function. Like the UNDP, Speth distinguishes be-

tween 'good' growth – defined as growth with equity, employment, environmental protection, and political empowerment – and the many contemporary examples of so-called jobless growth, ruthless growth, voiceless growth, rootless growth, and futureless growth (pp. 108–109). Today, he argues, neoclassical economics has become a 'secular religion' with a single overriding goal embraced by business, the political class, and much of the general population: growth at all costs. This 'growth fetish' leads directly to increasing pollution and resource use, such that '...one can only conclude that growth is the enemy of the environment. Economy and environment remain in collision.' (p. 57)

Part of the problem is market failure. The market fails to account for the valuable renewable and non-renewable resources and services provided by nature or the costs imposed on society and ecosystems by depletion and pollution. The author states, 'It has been noted that the planned Soviet economy failed because prices did not reflect economic realities. Today we live in a market economy that risks failing because prices do not reflect environmental realities.' (p. 100) In the face of such failures, state intervention is necessary to protect the public and ecosphere from the risks of environmental degradation and to help create incentives for ecologically responsible behaviour. Public policies and private practices should be guided not only by the tools provided by an innovative neoclassical microeconomic approach known as environmental economics. A new field called ecological economics provides an alternative perspective on the proper roles of the public and private sectors. Ecological economics emphasises that environmental solutions require more than just cost-benefit analyses and 'getting the prices right'. The market must be modified by ending perverse subsidies for destructive behaviour and by making the precautionary principle the basis for investments (pp. 100–101).

On the demand-side, Speth points an

accusing finger at the role of materialistic consumerism as a set of values and behaviours driving the modern economy. In the United States, consumer spending has come to make up 70% of all economic activity. The economy depends on ever-increasing consumption, which has been made possible for the last 30 years by unsustainable levels of personal borrowing. But the problem is not simply individual shoppers buying too much; their choices are strongly influenced by a sophisticated marketing industry that helps generate demand and manipulates consumer sensibilities. Speth sees the problem as largely systemic and directly linked to the imperatives of capitalism. This is why the solution involves not only making consumerism qualitatively greener, but actually reducing the overall quantity of consumption.

While Speth offers a dire assessment of the current state of both the environment and the social movements motivated to protect it, he is hopeful that solutions are possible. The title of the book suggests that we have reached the 'edge of the world' as the viability of one social system (capitalism) has ended, and a new alternative system (or 'bridge') to a new world is possible – and necessary. In the third part of the book, called 'Seedbeds of Transformation', the author explores possible ways to achieve 'transformative change' of the social arrangements that have wreaked such havoc on the natural world.

There are three main changes that Speth advocates to begin to reverse environmental decline. The first involves practical reforms of corporate power. While some businesses have been moving in a green direction, it would be a mistake to rely on voluntary 'corporate social responsibility' to change the system. Institutional changes are needed to reign in the unaccountable power of corporations in all spheres of life. New laws could mandate greener production and shifts in technology. And even more radical steps can be taken, including revoking the charters of cor-

porations that are repeat offenders against nature. The second is in the realm of consciousness. In Speth's view, values and ethics are at least as important as the material relations of production and consumption. Consumerism is not just the practice of buying more and more material objects or using resource-intensive services, it is also linked to the psychology of personal identity, status, and individualism. He cites Václav Havel, who suggested that 'the environmental crisis is a crisis of the spirit', and points out that the early American environmentalist Aldo Leopold called for a new 'land ethic' of respect for all living things and expansion of our concept of community to include the ecosphere (p. 200). A third step is reform in the political arena. Speth's words of advice for environmentalists are to broaden the agenda, get political, and build the movement. He laments the current weak, corrupt state of American politics and the high levels of corporate influence. The appropriate response is simultaneously localised and globalised political involvement. 'Building a new politics' will require strengthening local democracies while encouraging the 'cosmopolitan citizen' who is active on international issues. Environmentalists must connect their agenda with related social issues, emphasise human rights, address social problems such as income and other inequalities, and push for open media access, campaign finance reform, and limits to corporate lobbying, among other objectives.

In sum, this book proposes a blend of practical policy-oriented, legal, and regulatory responses and changes in values, ethics, and collective and individual behaviour. While Speth must be given credit for collecting, summarising, and synthesising a wide range of creative solutions, few of the ideas are original. The value-added of the book is found mainly in the insights gleaned from Speth's years of front-line experience with these issues, especially his analysis of the failures of the environmental movement. For instance, he tells in de-

tail how his WRI tried and failed in 1989 to work with President George H. W. Bush and Congress and later the Clinton Administration to address climate change and other issues, urging international cooperation (pp. 68–69). Such accounts, he argues, go beyond underscoring that the landscape is littered with worthy but badly neglected proposals for US government action. They also point out that ‘when today’s environmentalism recognizes problems, it believes they can be solved within the system, typically with new policies and, more recently, by engaging the corporate sector. ...Today’s environmentalism is forever hopeful on all this.’ (p. 69)

After reading the litany of overwhelming ecological challenges together with Speth’s reminiscences of decades of failure and setbacks, one might well wonder what explains his indefatigable confidence that fundamental change is possible on the necessary scale and timeframe. Because it is written with scientific accuracy but in non-technical language, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* will be of equal interest to students and teachers in the social sciences as well as anyone in the general public who wants to understand the current environmental crisis and learn about a range of creative potential responses. The book will be of particular use to sociologists for three main reasons. The first is that Speth reveals that struggles over political and economic power are central to understanding the obstacles to effective environmental protection. The second is his focus on both the institutional and personal aspects of the issues. And the third is his analysis of social movements – of why environmentalists often fail to achieve their goals, and of the hope for more effective movement building to make the social changes necessary to seriously address the ecological crisis.

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**Gerda Falkner, Oliver Treib
and Elisabeth Holzleithner:**
*Compliance in the Enlarged European
Union: Living Rights or Dead Letters?*
Aldershot, Burlington, 2008: Ashgate,
214 pp.

The process of European integration covers almost all aspects of society, economy, and polity. Although social policy remains in principle within the national competence, following the principle of subsidiarity, some degree of EU intervention is inevitable due to the implications of economic integration and economic freedoms (the harmonisation of the social protection systems) and the basic goals of European integration (a competitive and cohesive society). The EU uses both hard and soft instruments to promote the objectives of ‘European citizenship’, and in this process it advances some common ‘social standards’ within the EU. Given the subsidiarity principle, the question arises as to whether these common standards are actually respected by the individual member states, especially after the accession of the new member states in 2004. On the one hand, the new members are challenged by considerable economic pressures; on the other, they are expected to implement some of the more advanced social standards that have already been established within the EU (although in some respects their social standards have been developed sufficiently). Considering the more binding character of the economic agenda (the Stability and Growth Pact) compared to the ‘social standards’, several researchers have articulated their suspicions that these countries have instead opted for ‘social dumping’ in order to become competitive within the EU.

Social science research on the impact of the EU in terms of the ‘integration’ or ‘convergence’ of the national social policy systems has focused until now mainly on the role of the Open Coordination Method examples of which are the European Employ-