BOOK REVIEW PERSPECTIVES

Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Responsibility*


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Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger’s new book, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, continues the provocative debate that began with the publication of their original essay “The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World” in 2004. The book’s central argument is that “we must no longer put concepts like nature or the environment at the center of our politics,” and should focus instead on a more holistic approach where humans and human needs are considered part of the ecosystem as well as the creation of a new “politics of possibility.” In this light, the authors offer scathing critiques of Environmental Justice, Not-in-My-Backyard (NIMBY) campaigns, the American environmental movement in general, the “pollution paradigm,” and environmental hypocrisy (on this latter point the issue of Robert Kennedy, Jr. and his opposition to the Nantucket Sound wind park received an inordinate amount of attention). There is much to like in the book and much to question as well.

The call for a more holistic approach to environmental issues (i.e., *humans as part of the ecosystem and not separate*) is laudable and very much consistent with notions of sustainable development found increasingly in America’s state and local governments and communities. Some social scientists argue that advocacy for sustainable communities in post-industrial America already has become one of the major social movements of our time (e.g., Kates et al. 2005). Widespread concern with the long-term carrying capacity of our conventional economic, social, and ecological processes and with the institutions required to manage them has led many states, communities, and citizens to pursue innovative sustainability policies. Early approaches to sustainability have placed rather differing emphases on these various needs (Pezzoli, 1997; Sachs, 1999), but in general the four core dimensions of sustainable communities include economic, social, institutional, and environmental considerations. In many respects, paradigm change is already evident and precedes Nordhaus & Shellenberger’s call to action. Obviously, much more needs to be done, including the engagement of all American communities, not to mention the federal government, which hindered the sustainability movement during the George W. Bush Administration.

However, Nordhaus & Shellenberger argue that “sustainable development ignores the fact that ecological concern is a postmaterialist value that becomes widespread and strongly felt...only in post-scarcity societies.” To support the argument, they provide a case study of Brazil and its inability to balance development needs with environmental responsibility. They also begin with the premise that “[t]he connection between affluence and the birth of environmentalism goes a long way toward explaining why environmentalism in the United States emerged in the 1960s and not in the 1930s.” While an enormous body of social science research supports this premise, things are a bit more complicated, which has implications for their critique of what they call the pollution paradigm as well.

Public opinion research conducted by sociologist Riley Dunlap in twenty-four countries suggests that value change concerning the need for more rigorous environmental protection may be more global than anyone has suspected. While many citizens in post-industrial nations have expressed support for biocentric principles underlying environmentalism, as numerous scientific surveys document, people in developing nations have also accepted those environment-regarding principles. Surprisingly, Dunlap’s survey indicated that a majority of respondents in both developing and postindustrial nations give a higher priority to protecting the environment than to the pursuit of economic growth (Dunlap et al. 1993). These findings are also evident in the *World Values Survey 2000* and in the Pew Research Center’s 2007 47-Nation survey. However, when survey respondents were asked how much environmental problems may affect their own health and that of their immediate family, the residents of developing nations were...
highly likely to see past and present danger from environmental problems; in contrast, residents in industrialized countries were likely to express concern for environmental problems likely to surface in the future (defined in the survey as being within the next 25 years). These findings led Dunlap to suggest that “residents of the poorer nations—which often suffer from poor water quality and high levels of urban air pollution—are much more likely to see their health as being negatively affected by environmental problems at the present.” Other surveys have echoed these findings regarding how objective conditions affect citizens’ concern for environmental protection.

Certain cultural factors found among peoples in different world regions also have been identified as leading to increased environmental awareness, or at least increasing potential receptivity to sustainable development principles (Inglehart, 1995). Consequently, depending on the context, there are multiple paths to environmental consciousness and sustainable development besides postmaterialist value change, including, but not limited to, culture, religion, and objective environmental conditions such as polluted air and water, and the effects of climate change (e.g., temperature, drought, fire). Interestingly, the 2007 Pew survey found citizens in many developing countries (e.g., India, Nigeria, and Turkey) more concerned about global warming than residents of some advanced industrial countries (e.g., Germany, Great Britain, and the United States)! An international, inclusive, holistic, and effective sustainable development and natural resource-management paradigm should embrace a diversity of perspectives and experiences that go along with differing levels of development, environmental conditions, and cultural traditions.

Of course, just because public opinion indicates concern about the environment or climate change, or even suggests that citizens would prefer protecting the environment over some economic concerns as many international polls have found, does not mean that political and economic elites in developing and even advanced industrial nations have the same aims. While Nordhaus & Shellenberger focus on the problems and failures of the American environmental movement in dealing with climate change and other issues, I would suggest the focus should be more on the socioeconomic and political power structure in the United States and other countries that leads to inaction.

Given the difficulty ordinary citizens have in dealing with the complexities of environmental matters, and especially climate change, the processes by which societies confront complex and technical issues involving the broader public interest is important. The formation of environmental groups has been key in this respect. The environmental movement has been characterized as an eruption from “below” by many social scientists, with demands for increased citizen input in the decision-making process lying at their base. Environmental groups have pushed for increased democratization as a fundamental component of environmental policy. Political scientists have identified two distinct forms of political participation. The first form is the “elite-directed” mode of political action represented by sociopolitical institutions—as represented by political parties, bureaucrats, and industry—that are hierarchical in nature and mobilize action in a “top-down” fashion. In contrast, the second form is the “elite challenging” mode, a pattern of political activity that is generally more issue-specific, operates outside traditional political channels, and tends to use unconventional tactics to influence public policy. Environmental activism may be characterized as a form of elite-challenging activism in which the existing political and economic agenda is challenged and changes in policy sought. Obviously, if the public is skeptical and distrusts the movement, its effectiveness is compromised.

Nordhaus & Shellenberger report public-opinion data on the views of Americans regarding environmental activists as “extremists”; however, the overwhelming majority of opinion polls conducted in the United States since the 1990s paint a much more positive picture. While support for some indicators has declined in recent years, as Nordhaus & Shellenberger report, the overall view is still fairly positive. For example, a March 11–14, 2007 Gallup Poll found that 22% of the public agreed that the environmental movement has “definitely done more good than harm” and 44% agreed that the environmental movement had “probably done more good than harm.” I would suggest that the environmental movement—which is enormously diverse in approaches and perspectives—continues to play an important role as watchdog(s) of political and economic elites and as a communicator of environmental information to citizens and the media. However, as Nordhaus & Shellenberger argue, the message needs to be more holistic, less dogmatic, and include human society. Ignoring economic and social considerations of natural resource management and environmental policy can lead to narrow and unrealistic policy prescriptions as well as a decline in environmentalist legitimacy.

My final thought here concerns the “politics of possibilities” and “dreaming differently” themes throughout the book. Given the nature, scale, and complexity of climate change, this is a noble and warranted call to action. However, the United States has some major barriers to developing and implementing a new type of politics. Many observers have
argued that while the country shares many socio-economic and political characteristics with other post-industrial democracies, such as those in the European Union, some very important differences lead to distinctly different approaches to policy making, as well as to policy stalemate—both domestically and internationally (or as political scientists say, “pluralist paralysis”). It has been argued that what most differentiates the United States from other postindustrial nations is a political culture that embraces individualism to a far greater extent, and also a governmental system that emphasizes separation of powers and federalism. Both these features of American politics have profound implications for how policy issues—such as climate change—are defined and managed. The American emphasis on self-interest and private property rights makes it very difficult to address communal problems such as climate change and resource degradation. An indication of this cultural orientation toward the sanctity of private property and belief in the virtues of limited government is manifest in the small size of the governmental sector relative to other postindustrial nations.

In contrast to individualism, communitarian, or organic political culture—much more evident in Western Europe and Canada—reflects a belief in the priority of community over individual rights in a number of important policy areas. These priorities reflect a commitment to public goods and the perception of a collective or common stake in the protection of the natural world. By contrast, individualism focuses on the rights of the individual, itself a cornerstone of capitalist democratic economic systems and classical liberal political thought. NIMBY and self-interested responses to policy issues are the result. This situation is exacerbated by American governmental arrangement, with specific checks and balances, as well as a federal system whereby the various levels of government—including the national, state, and local—are all involved in environmental affairs to varying degrees.

This set of institutions and cross-checks leads to an extraordinarily fragmented and complicated policy-making process. Failure to gain agreement among the many “players” involved in major public policy issues in the United States often leads to gridlock. Given our cultural and institutional barriers to change, I fear that we may be left with only our dreams for a positive national response to climate change. However, there has been movement among some state and local governments and communities to address this issue holistically. The development of an effective international regime will be even more difficult given the larger differences between nation states.

About the Author

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References


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Following an onslaught of climate change treatments in the popular and academic press alike, the majority of which follow a similar script, Break Through is a breath of fresh air. This is not to say Nordhaus & Shellenberger’s thesis should be wholeheartedly embraced, for I take issue with several aspects, but the book makes insightful contributions to the dialogue on climate politics. Let us begin with a brief summary of highlights.

According to the authors, the nay-saying, limit-laden, doomsday politics of environmentalists, and the left more broadly, have failed. This approach to the global warming file in particular has contributed more to the problem than to the solution. Environmentalists’ prescriptions for limits and individual sacrifice, and their lack of redemptive vision, do not inspire the creative social change desperately needed to address climate change. In short, environmentalists are long on problems and woefully short on solutions.
that, when offered at all, “constrain rather than unleash human activity” (emphasis in original). Much of this failure boils down to the persistent framing of global climate change as a pollution issue. But climate change is far more complex, requiring more imaginative solutions than regulating limits on carbon dioxide, a point, the authors argue, that major environmental groups have failed to grasp.

The authors urge, instead, a full-scale transition to a new energy economy, requiring that we unleash all the human creativity the current population has to offer. The best way to unleash ingenuity is by focusing on increasing prosperity. Prosperity brings out the best in people after all, and poverty and collapse (whether rhetorical or real) bring out the worst. Environmental concern, inherently a postmaterial politics, can only be fostered by first addressing material needs: “thinking ecologically depends on prospering economically.”

Addressing material security is not simply a matter of raising living standards among the poorest of the poor, however. Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger point to the increase in the West of what they call insecure affluence: living standards that have not kept up with expectations, leading to increasing household debt at the same time that many types of income have become less secure. The lack of public concern for the environment, as well as the rise in xenophobia and other forms of intolerance, are attributed to insecure affluence. Attempts to generate commitment to climate change by fostering guilt, calling for constraint, and warning of ensuing doom, according to the authors, are not likely to be received warmly in such a social milieu. What we need instead is for environmentalism to function more like a church, capitalizing on the weak social ties that define the social capital of the new creative class, and moving away from issue-based politics to a values-based politics that embraces rather than challenges individualism and prosperity.

This work is not so much fresh as freshly-packaged, bringing together what have heretofore been unintegrated streams of argumentation, many of which, furthermore, have been restricted to academic literature. The authors provide hard-edged critiques of environmentalism, its essentialist ideological premises, and its political strategy, pointing out that environmentalists too often blame others for their failures. Noting a commonly cited environmentalist complaint, they state, “the problem is not that global warming is invisible; it’s that environmentalists depend too much on the visible.” The steadfast reliance on positivist notions of objective science as representative of the environment, combined with rhetoric about how Nature must be protected from humans, relies on the faulty belief that humans are separate from nature: “The issue is not whether humans should control Nature, for that is inevitable, but rather how humans should control natures—nonhuman and human.” Assertions about speaking for Nature are ultimately authoritative and non-democratic claims to be above politics.

But, the authors argue, the belief that there exists a Nature separate from humans is no more tenable than the belief that there is a market separate from humans. By accepting that both are socially constructed, we raise the potential to (re)create both. This potential must inform the development of a coherent vision and ideological framework, currently lacking in the environmental movement. Environmentalists could look to churches, the authors suggest, for developing strategies to increase the breadth and depth of support, replacing the thin identity of environmentalism with a thick identity more akin to evangelicalism.

The authors also provide insightful and constructive critiques of contemporary environmental campaigns, including the Brazilian Amazon and the environmental justice movement. These two chapters, augmented by examples throughout the book, emphasize that political strategies: 1) must be deeply reflective of their political, economic, and cultural context; 2) must address root road blocks to prosperity (like poverty and debt); and 3) can only be effective when premised on building allies, not creating enemies.

My enthusiasm for Break Through is tempered, however, by several loose ends, contradictions, and ultimately a very dangerous premise. First, reference to academic treatments is selective, one might even say sporadic in places. The academic reader will thus find certain holes in the arguments posed, and can rightfully question the newness of much of Nordhaus & Shellenberger’s social analysis. The complete absence of reference to the literature on environmental movements is particularly notable, considering the central focus of the book. But these absences in and of themselves are not sufficient to discredit the work. The authors, after all, are not academics, nor do they portray the book as such.

The work is also replete with glossed-over pragmatic issues that define the feasibility of the transition proposed. These include, for starters, the sheer magnitude of organizational and infrastructural changes that would be required to enable a shift to a new energy economy. Secondly, the authors appear to ignore the fact that the interests that have been so successful at opposing carbon limits are among the same that would (indeed do) oppose significant financial investments in alternative energy research, with the possible exception of carbon capture and storage for obvious reasons. Third, while the authors...
chide environmentalists for their failure to acknowledge the inevitability of climatic change and all its requisite social and ecological implications, they themselves fail to discuss this situation any further, notably the fact that the transition to a new energy economy would inevitably need to take place in the context of climate change calamity.

And now for the contradictions. The authors provide an astute critique of the essentialism that tends to emerge from both sides of the environmental political divide, noting that “there is no single spirit or essence that defines us. Humans are not essentially opportunistic, reactive, conservative, creative, or destructive.” And yet the authors’ central thesis is premised on an unquestioned conclusion that empirically has very mixed support, that prosperity brings out the best in people (and environmental concern in particular), while poverty and collapse bring out the worst (and a lack of environmental concern in particular). This is certainly a deterministic and arguably essentialist statement, for which there is a multitude of counter-evidence. While the social consequences of crisis is an important area of social scientific research, we are far from the point at which we can draw generalizable conclusions, and such conclusions, if and when they emerge, are highly unlikely to be universal. The same, of course, can be said of the environmental salience/prosperity relationship.

Contradiction number two: the authors largely suggest a politics that accommodates consumerism, rather than replaces it: “The problem is that none of us, whether we are wealthy environmental leaders or average Americans, are willing to significantly sacrifice our standard of living.” True enough, but rather than serving as a justification for challenging Western predispositions for lavish material consumption, the authors suggest that we need to simply find new energy sources to support current Western living standards (which they admit are ever-rising on the material scale), while at the same time raising global standards to similar levels. One might ask, if we were not able to accomplish this remarkable feat with fossil fuels, how is it possible that we would be able to do so with far less accessible renewable energy sources? At one point, the reader is asked: “Is it really so hard to imagine a world with healthy forests, a stable climate, and seven to ten billion people living in sustainable cities?” Um, the answer from this reader is, yes.

How is it that these authors do not find this vision problematic? Because by doing away with political discussion of ecological limits, we somehow do away with the limits themselves. Their insistence that “[t]here are still seven billion wondrous animals, each one of us capable of making ourselves into something utterly unique” (but not apparently also capable of leaving an ecological footprint of any consequence) is pure Julian Simon 27 years later. Nordhaus & Shellenberger thus embark on a path that has been trodden repeatedly, one that has not taken us any further down the road toward environmental improvement.

The authors’ call for a more constructive politics that addresses prosperity and inspires creativity should most certainly be heeded. But a politics that ignores ecological thresholds is as dangerous as a politics that ignores human ingenuity is ineffective. Rather than embrace environmentalism as a solely postmaterialist value, environmentalists would benefit from recognizing the many ways, places, and forms in which environmental concerns are in a sense no longer postmaterial at all. What environmental degradation represents is not solely threats to recreational opportunity and old growth forests, but to security of home and family, the very personal security concerns that the authors describe as so definitive of Western social context today.

I certainly do not recommend dismissal of this work, but neither do I suggest fully embracing it. It is a good read that must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. As the authors note, we need a politics “powerful enough to transform the global energy economy,” and for this enterprise, all contributions are welcome.

About the Author

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Is the way we are living now sustainable? Do Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger provide an effective vision to move us toward sustainability? The answer to both questions is probably “no.”

The authors argue that because of its focus on pollution, the environmental movement has brought us about as far as it can. To solve the really knotty problems presented by global warming will require a new way of looking at environmental issues. They
argue that we will not be able to work our way out of this problem with regulatory schemes alone. Rather, we will need to harness the power of investment:

Overcoming global warming demands something qualitatively different from limiting our contamination of nature. It demands unleashing human power, creating a new economy, and remaking nature as we prepare for the future. And to accomplish all of that, the right models come not from raw sewage, acid rain, or the ozone hole but instead from the very thing environmentalists have long imagined to be the driver of pollution in the first place: economic development...[What is needed is] an investment-centered approach...[The problem] must be understood more as a national economic development agenda than as a regulatory framework to limit carbon emissions...What environmental leaders have so far refused to do is put this vision of human power, growth, and development at the center of their politics.

The authors believe we need to harness the power of investment because of four factors that environmentalists have largely ignored. First, the success of pollution-control regulation in the latter half of the twentieth century shapes the way we see environmental problems and limits the ways we can imagine to deal with them. Second, “environmental issues are not as high a priority as prosperity is.” Third, people will not turn their attention to environmental issues until their safety and security needs are met, until they feel securely affluent. Although Americans are wealthy by the standards of the rest of the world, their commitment to environmental values is shallow because of increased economic and social insecurity marked by desire for status and belonging and “the gradual return to...survival values, such as xenophobia, patriarchy, and the acceptance of violence...what we are describing...as insecure affluence.” Finally, the rest of the world will not respond to global warming unless they can develop; “indeed, around the world there is a very strong association between prosperity and environmental values.”

Is the way we live now sustainable? The authors say it is not. We do not need to look far to find others who share that view. In a recent keynote speech at the BookExpo America conference, Thomas Friedman (2008) pointed out the consequences of adding one billion people to the population of earth, which the United Nations projects will happen in the next twelve years. Friedman said if we give each new person a 60-watt incandescent light bulb and those billion people turn on their bulbs for only four hours per day we would need to build the equivalent of about twenty coal-burning power plants.

Do Nordhaus & Shellenberger offer a vision to move us forward? They suggest “a new social contract appropriate for our post-industrial economy.” Although Friedman (2008) says that America is not ready to meet that challenge, Fiorino (2006) observes that we have already made great strides in describing what this “contract” might look like. “The key question [now] is this: How do we design and build a regulatory system that will promote a continuing, broad, and enduring greening of industry that builds on the demonstrated achievement of the leading firms?” Analysts have pondered this question for many years. For example, Fiorino suggests the Lee Thomas and William Reilly approach that looks forward to a new paradigm, including: “(1) defining the environmental ‘problem’ as more than just pollution control; (2) expanding the use of consensus-based processes; (3) developing new policy tools to complement regulation; and (4) working to integrate across environmental media and policy sectors, such as agriculture and energy.” Nordhaus & Shellenberger have a deep connection to the environmental movement, but the argument presented in this book is—by now—fairly conventional and their prescription notably vague.

Their work finds an echo in Cohen (2006) and Fiorino (2006), who each trace the history of environmental protection in the United States along similar paths of first regulation, then regulatory reform, and now sustainability. With Nordhaus & Shellenberger, both Cohen and Fiorino recognize that “the old regulation has unwanted side effects and is unsuited to the task of protecting the environment in a rapidly changing world” (Fiorino, 2006). Nordhaus & Shellenberger argue that because of the “intersection of prosperity and ecological concern...[we] must create the conditions for prosperity in the developing world.” They describe the new social contract to accomplish this:

The new vision of prosperity will not be the vision of economic growth held by those who worship at the altar of the market. It will define wealth not in gross economic terms but as overall well-being. Wealth will be defined as that which provides us with the freedom to become unique individuals. It will embrace our power to create new markets. And it will turn the environmental movement’s conditional support for economic development on its head: developing economies will be sustainable precisely to
the extent that we invest in their development.

In contrast with Nordhaus & Shellenberger, both Fiorino and Cohen present more concrete prescriptions. Before the United States can effectively support sustainability abroad, Fiorino outlines five important steps: change the laws to promote regulatory and business innovation; focus implementation on “the better, proven environmental performers” by offering them more flexibility; offer “environmental management contracts” based on core performance indicators (i.e., emphasize performance over process whenever possible); replace the deterrence model of regulation with a facilitative approach for small operations; and establish performance agreements with industry organizations.

Cohen (2006) envisions six steps the United States should take. These might be summarized as investments; improved information about environmental conditions; better communication and understanding of environmental data; improved education of environmental professionals; better economic policies that lead to sustainable development; advanced environmental analysis and pollution prevention; and expanded community-based institutions to implement sustainable strategies. Although they do not say so, these kinds of investments might typify what Nordhaus & Shellenberger have in mind as steps the United States could take to promote prosperity at home and abroad.

People raising the alarm about climate change say we need to move quickly with whatever strategy we choose. Friedman suggests that we reached a tipping point in about 2000, after which five big trends began to work together to conspire against solving the problem. These trends are energy and resource scarcity and demand, petrodictatorship, energy poverty, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Friedman (2008) sees no easy way out and remarks, “Americans cannot buy enough compact florescent bulbs and hybrid vehicles to reverse the trends.”

Fiorino (2006) observes that partisan disputes held the United States back during the latter part of the twentieth century. For those who agree that something must be done about climate change, the disputes were based on different behavioral assumptions about how policy tools actually work. Schneider & Ingram (1990) describe the suite of possible policy solutions. Each is based on a set of beliefs about how people actually behave in the face of a problem. They suggest five general policy alternatives: authority, incentives, capacity building, symbolic and hortatory, and learning. From my reading of Nordhaus & Shellenberger, Fiorino, and Cohen I would say they all favor a prescription that retains authority, incorporates incentives, and invests in capacity building. In other words, they all recommend what Fiorino called a “mixed-scanning” approach (see also Etzioni, 1986). Leaders can help the process along by exhortation and choosing the right symbols to frame the debate.

Is that mixed approach going to be enough? In the Introduction to their book of readings entitled The State and Nature, Clarke & Cortner (2002) observe that

\[O\]ver the space of two hundred years there has been a marked increase in the voices heard in the environmental policy arena. With the introduction of new voices there comes a different conception of nature, or at least different beliefs of what is important and what is not. And, while the extension of democracy in this manner is generally considered a positive development, it is possible to have too much group identification and not enough community spirit. We believe that this is the political condition facing the United States in the twenty-first century…What many people think is needed at this juncture is a political movement, and strong leadership to break what scholar James MacGregor Burns called in 1963 the “deadlock of democracy.”

An investment agenda might be part of such a political movement. A recent article in The New York Times gives us a window on how this might work using the example of human garbage. A combination of regulation, incentives, and investments has made it possible to safely incinerate trash in much of Europe. But the problem is huge. Despite being a hot issue, success in coping with trash depends on “the structure of government, management expertise, and national priorities” (Rosenthal, 2008). That assessment, from a spokeswoman for the European Commission’s Environment Directorate, sounds a lot like Nordhaus & Shellenberger, among others, who recommend that we need to take a new look at the toolkit for sustainability.

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