

## Grappling With Sustainability

Trent Schroyer and Thomas Golodik (eds.), *Creating a Sustainable World: Past Experiences, Future Struggles*, New York: Apex Press, 2006.

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In the February 17, 2006 issue of *Science* magazine, the publication's editor-in-chief Donald Kennedy wrote an editorial criticizing what he sees as the Bush administration's pattern of ignoring and sometimes suppressing scientific evidence "if it doesn't favor the preferred policy outcome" [p. 917]. I listened to an interview of Kennedy on NPR on the same day that I began to read Trent Schroyer's and Thomas Golodik's *Creating a Sustainable World: Past Experiences, Future Struggles* and was struck by the similarity in the tones of both Kennedy's interview and Schroyer's and Golodik's text. Kennedy felt compelled by current circumstances to deviate from the conventional position of scientific objectivity and enter directly into contemporary politics.

In a similar vein, Schroyer acknowledges that a scholar critical of current economic and political conditions risks "being labeled as an extremist who has lost academic 'objectivity'" [p. 89]. Nonetheless, the essayists included in this collection consistently illustrate in tone and in word their sense of obligation to taking such a risk. In this case the spark was not a political gag rule, but something perhaps more insidious: corporate co-optation of the concept of sustainability.

Schroyer explains that while sustainable development once implied "an affirmation of wider procedures and open discourse...to secure the commons and elevate human and community rights," the concept has come to imply a more narrowly profitable focus on strategies "for integrating market-guided economic growth and free trade into the world economy" [p. 8].

In the first section, the authors document this shift in the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development organized in Johannesburg in 2002. For example, in her essay "The Great Betrayal," Vandana Shiva reports that during this summit—ostensibly a follow-up to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992—industry representatives effectively shifted the conference agenda to "globalizing the non-sustainable, unethical, iniquitous systems of ownership, control and use of natural resources" [p. 26].

But the implications go beyond one conference. In the second section, the authors focus on "exposing the hidden realities of corporate domination" [p. 89]. Schroyer explains, "The American Corporation has become more than just a model for business. It is an organizing principle for society" [p. 95]. Anchoring this section is Robert Engler's fascinating article on the history of the oil industry, beginning with the first oil well in 1859 and documenting the significant role this industry has played and continues to play in United States' public policy.

While the first two sections focus on the dominance of the corporate position in political and economic contexts, the third section looks at this dominance in an epistemological context. In "Sustainable Development: A Systems of Knowledge Approach," Stephen A. Marglin distinguishes two different types of knowledge—episteme and techné—and asserts the importance of cultural diversity as a source of worldviews representing alternatives to the "dominant [Western] model,

based as it is on what we understand to be very possibly an unsustainable, and in any case a destructive, ideology of knowledge” [p. 153].

At the heart of these arguments lie the fundamental laws of matter and energy. In a system of finite resources, increasing some individuals’ access to those resources will, efficiency improvements notwithstanding, likely decrease access of other individuals. Put in less abstract terms, one cannot realistically talk about global poverty relief without also talking about a reduction in the flow of resources siphoned through rich, industrialized nations.

Peter Montague touches on this theme in the first section, explicating Herman Daly’s focus on sustainability in terms of *throughput* that does not exceed “the regenerative and absorptive capacity of the environment” [p. 61]. In the fourth and final section, this concept takes center stage as the focus shifts to the democratization of wealth. In this context Michael Shuman provides both inspiration and practical ideas for helping to develop viable local economies, and Joan Dye Gussow explains the importance of supporting local agriculture and shortening the chain from the farm to your table.

Interestingly, the authors included an epilogue providing two essays by “on-the-ground” sustainability workers with widely different views on sustainability. While Michael Edelstein suggests sustainability as a new social paradigm replacing modernism, Gene Bazan presents sustainability as a position of Western domination that fails to appreciate what it means to have a more nuanced connection with one’s environment.

Bazan says enough about the “subsistence perspective” to raise curiosity, but not enough to make a judgment. However, his thoughts emphasize my major criticism of this text—its rigidly anthropocentric position. It is perhaps unfair to criticize a text on a subject as vast as sustainability for what it leaves out. However, the almost complete omission of discussion of nonhuman species in the context of environmental sustainability is troubling.

As Wolfgang Sachs et al. explain in the first section, “At the time of Rio, sustainable development was mainly about protecting nature, but now, it is first and foremost about protecting people” [p. 40]. In part this shift represents the realization that environmentalism can become a form of social and economic elitism in which, for example, marginalized people are removed from an area “for the sake of the forest.” However, the almost total exclusion of nonhuman species in these essays is perhaps a sign of the lack of ecological connection that Bazan identifies.

Above all, *Creating a Sustainable World* is an appeal to define ourselves as something more than economic beings—as members of local and global communities—and to interact with each other according to the sympathies and responsibilities implicit in such a definition. While I commend the authors for this appeal, my own view of sustainability includes the environment as something more than a collection of resources to be shared more equitably than they are now; it is a part of both the local and global communities to which we belong.