

The Bridge at the End of the World: A Review

This is a review of James Gustave Speth's 2008 book The Bridge at the End of the World, which has been revolutionary for my thinking about the convergence of poverty & inequality, economic oppression, ecological devastation, and the loss of American democracy. Writing from an environmental perspective, Speth suggests that the old incremental, one-problem-at-a-time approach will not work and that we must work for a change in human consciousness that will recognize our place in the natural world, our responsibility one for the other, the failure of consumerism to make us happy, and the deep structural changes in corporations and government to bring us to sanity. Fortunately, those changes are well underway.

"We have not inherited the earth from our parents; we have borrowed it from our children."

-- James Gustave Speth

Honest hope for our future is difficult to find. To look clear-eyed at climate change and the other multiple environmental crises, at global poverty and increasing inequality, at militarism, at capitalism's domination of the economy and the power of corporations to block meaningful political change, and at the increasing failure of democracy to reflect our deepest values—to look without blinking at all these intertwined threats and still offer not only hope but also possibilities for transformation is a gift we must not let pass. James Gustave Speth's *The Bridge at the End of the World* (Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2008) is such a gift.

Speth, the dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, has been for decades the "ultimate insider" within establishment environmentalism, serving, for instance, as environmental adviser to President Carter, the head of the United Nation's largest agency for international development, and litigator and lobbyist for strong environmental laws. Yet in this fearless review of today's mêlée of environmental changes, he readily acknowledges that the

threats will overwhelm efforts to contain them unless we move beyond traditional environmentalism toward a fundamental transformation of politics, economics, and lifestyle.

In thinking about our environmental future, what ordinarily drains me of hope is not the profound systemic changes or the revolution in personal lifestyle that will be necessary to move toward a no-growth economy. Rather, it is the vast power of the corporations, the enormous influence of advertising on our spiritual and political values, and the seeming incapacity of the American political system to respond. We know what to do about most environmental problems and the issues of injustice. What drains me of hope is the knowledge that virtually every needed change will step on the toes of some powerful group that can stymie public consensus.

In the face of this kind of hopelessness, Speth argues for a thorough transformation. We cannot attack environmental problems one-by-one or in isolation from necessary changes in politics, corporate structure, economy, and injustice.

In general, the world of practical affairs does not truly appreciate how much negative change is coming at us, nor how fast. ... So we must look beyond the world of practical affairs to those who are thinking difficult and unconventional thoughts and proposing transformative change. (p xiv)

“Looking into the Abyss”—Speth’s first-chapter, careful (almost understated) review of those coming negative changes—is uncompromising. Climate change is well advanced, and severe damage to human well-being is inevitable, even if we stopped putting excess CO₂ into the air today ... which we won’t. It is “highly likely that societies are already too late to head off very serious climate change impacts,” (p 28) which will have devastating effects, especially on the world’s poor.

And it’s not just climate change, of course. About half of the world’s tropical and temperate forests have been lost—mostly to clear land for agriculture—leading to loss of species and soil depletion ... and worsening climate change. Desertification of arable land—from soil erosion, salinization, devegetation, and soil compaction—has already damaged areas that are together the size of China, and each year an additional area the size of Nebraska is lost to food production. Already human use consumes approximately half of the globe’s total available fresh water supply, and the needs will double by 2050. Already one out of every five people around the world lacks clean drinking water (leading to the deaths of about 1.6 million children every year). Seventy-five percent of the world’s fisheries are already fished to capacity or overfished;

the population of swordfish, marlin, tuna, and other large fish has been decimated to ten percent of original stocks. Due to on-going pollution of air and water, virtually every person on earth harbors dozens of toxic chemicals, many of which are already known to cause cancer, hormone disruption, genetic defects or other diseases. Loss of entire species is occurring at a rate one thousand times baseline, so that forty percent of all recognized species on the planet risk extinction, including a quarter of all mammals.

These are devastating changes to our planet. Even writing from a strictly utilitarian perspective that nature is humanity's resource to exploit as it sees fit (that is, not considering the intrinsic value of the natural world independent of people and our consequent duty of ecological stewardship), the UN-initiated Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (a four-year effort involving 1360 scientists and other experts) concluded in 2005, "Nearly two thirds of the services provided by nature to humankind are found to be in decline worldwide. In effect, the benefits reaped from our engineering of the planet have been achieved by running down natural capital assets." (p 40)

Clearly, human activity is overwhelming the earth's capacity for homeostasis. While exact prediction of the future is a fool's game, to play Russian roulette without even knowing how many bullets are in the chambers is insane.

The complex interactions between these environmental crises and other economic and political threats are underappreciated. "All these issues can contribute to conflicts over human access to water, food, land, and energy; ecological refugees and humanitarian emergencies; failed states; and armed movements spurred by declining circumstances. They are profound affronts to fundamental fairness and justice in the world," (p 40) which, in a vicious cycle, in turn dramatically aggravate environmental degradation.

While acknowledging some significant successes—specifically in protecting the ozone layer and ameliorating acid rain—from the traditional environmentalist response (of which he has been an important leader), Speth makes clear that these successes have been overwhelmed by ongoing degradation. The traditional response—pragmatic and incrementalist, enacting new policies through government bureaucracies or engaging the corporate sector, trusting that problems can be remedied within the system at acceptable economic costs, downplaying the necessary lifestyle changes and threats to economic growth—is inadequate and must be revolutionized.

A central issue is that environmental devastation is built into the capitalist economic structure, exacerbated by the extraordinary power of large corporations and reinforced by the failure of democracy in the face of that power. Environmental tinkering with these structures is not enough; they must be radically transformed. Within the developed world, significant lifestyle changes will be necessary. Unless there is fundamental transformation of society, Speth convinces me, there will be little chance of significant environmental recovery until it is far too late.

Market capitalism was arguably an appropriate mechanism for organizing the economy when the fundamental economic problem was scarcity, when there weren't enough of the necessities for everyone. Resources were for practical purposes unlimited, human technology wasn't yet able to drastically alter the environment, and productivity (economic output per worker) was low. But—thanks in large part to the power of market capitalism—those conditions no longer pertain. There is now enough for everyone; the primary problems are maldistribution and injustice; resources (eg oil) are increasingly limited; technology can easily overwhelm the earth's homeostasis, and productivity is high.

Markets work through appropriate pricing of resources and products. But most environmental damage is external to the market. Under free-market conditions, my polluting the river doesn't cost me anything (the people downstream have to pay in one way or another). The cost of preventing or cleaning up the pollution is, therefore, not included in the cost of my product. This competitive necessity to "externalize" costs renders free-market capitalism impotent (even in theory) to control environmental damage. The only solution is for government to force internalization of the costs, but global corporate power makes such government response difficult and relatively ineffective. Similarly,

[t]here are fundamental biases in capitalism that favor the present over the future and the private over the public. Future generations cannot participate in capitalism's markets. From an environmental perspective, that is a huge flaw because the essence of sustainable development is equity toward future generations. (p 61)

Moreover, built into the legal fundamentals of the corporation are profoundly anti-social structures. The only liability that corporate owners (shareholders) have for the corporation's mistakes, for instance, is the loss of their investment; they cannot be sued even for the corporation's culpable malfeasance. The corporation is a "person" whose "freedom of speech" (ie advertising) cannot be limited by the community's best interests. Corporate managers are not legally permitted to make moral (eg pro-ecological) decisions that do not enrich the corporation financially; that is, managers are legally driven to externalize any cost they can. All

of which is to say that we have created immensely powerful, utterly amoral entities, given them all the precious legal rights of human beings, yet require no human being to be accountable for their actions. John Cavanagh et al put it bluntly. “We must dramatically change the publicly traded, limited liability global corporation, just as previous generations set out to eliminate or control the monarchy.” (p. 173 [\[1\]](#))

But the deeper, even more fundamental problem is that capitalism requires constant growth. Competition forces firms to expand in order to survive. The all-important financial interests of shareholders demand growth. Consumerism (where goods and services are acquired not primarily to satisfy common needs but to create identity and meaning) always requires more. Politicians discover that economic growth boosts approval rates, keeps difficult social justice and other issues at bay and generates larger revenues without raising taxes, so they are unlikely to challenge corporate growth. “Growth has often been America’s ‘out’—the way, many believed, that the nation could somehow square the circle and reconcile its love of liberty with its egalitarian pretensions.” (p 122) The explicit assumption of virtually every national politician is that economic growth is the bedrock of the American Dream, ignoring the inconvenient truth that constant growth is incompatible with the survival of an earth hospitable to human life. (In a living organism, constant growth is called “cancer.”) Without radical societal transformation, the only remaining brakes on constant economic growth are the earth’s ecological limits. To be sure, those brakes will ultimately be mercilessly effective. We *will* stop growing ... eventually. Whether human beings will find that which remains desirable is an entirely different question.

Speth is writing specifically to Americans and more generally to the people from developed nations since that 20% of the world’s people account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures. But he also recognizes the massive environmental devastation in developing countries, which puts poverty and inequality squarely on the environmental agenda, too. As long as people remain without adequate food, shelter, health care, or education, we cannot expect them to voluntarily slow their economic growth. As it is, the poor bear the brunt of the environment’s rejoinder to our assaults. As a global culture we simply don’t stand a chance unless there is enough redistribution of income to give the world’s poor some recognizable stake in the future of the earth.

The only hope for adequate change is through governmental action, but the rise of corporate globalism has given corporate power a stranglehold on the American democracy. The corporate community is cohesive on issues that affect its general welfare; its financial contributions to campaigns followed by intense lobbying (through an army of 30,000 lobbyists in Washington alone) give it enormous political power, so that on most issues that seriously concern the corporate community there is little disagreement between the two political parties. Furthermore, through commercial advertising, political issue advertising, support for business-oriented think tanks, well-funded studies, positions on non-profit boards and

contributions to their causes, and support for university and other research, corporations are able to dominate public discussion of most issues. The few forums for truthful environmental education of the citizenry are marginalized. The largest media outlets, of course, are all corporations themselves, sharing the same broad corporate interests (on, for instance, labor, government reform, economy, and regulation).

On the face of it, I will admit, this does not seem hopeful. The hope, as I see it, is that Speth recognizes and articulates the breadth of the change that will be necessary. Working at things piecemeal—while perhaps necessary in the short run—will only delay the full-blown nightmare unless we are also working simultaneously to transform the entire system: economic, social, political, and environmental all at once. The shorthand is that the ecological disaster can be averted only by a fundamental change in the economy, which will happen only with a fundamental change in corporate structure and power, which will happen only with a fundamental change in governance. The epitome of hopelessness is to work at something that—even if it succeeds—has no chance of changing the larger structures that condemn us to an unacceptable future. Far better, (in my heart at least) is to work as a part of a larger transformation—already well underway, according to Speth—that recognizes and is attacking the fundamental problems at their roots, even if those problems seem profound and vast.

Is this just trading one kind of hopelessness for another? What are the realistic chances of such fundamental change? Speth makes several important points.

First, such deep and wide-spread change is not generally possible during most political eras but does become possible during times of crisis; and our nation is entering such a period of crisis that will become increasingly severe. 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the financial meltdown, and the current recession are merely the foreshocks of what is coming. Quoting Gar Alperovitz, Speth reminds us, “Fundamental change—indeed, radical systemic change—is a common as grass in world history.” (p 183) People rarely see it coming (and it isn’t usually the change they anticipated), but it comes frequently and, often, suddenly. Speth was writing before the 2008 presidential election, which certainly demonstrated the possibility of political change.

Second, the dirty little secret of America’s commitment to consumerism and economic growth is that it doesn’t make us any happier. If more consumption made human being happier, Speth concedes, there would be virtually no chance of stopping the environmental tsunami that is coming. But it doesn’t. Corporate advertising’s core message—that “more” will make you happier—is a bald-faced lie, and most of us know it. Study after study indicates that beyond a certain minimal standard of living, increases don’t raise either the levels of self-perceived happiness or the psychological measures of well-being. In fact, just the opposite appears to be

true. As a nation we are—even by objective psychiatric measures—more anxious and more depressed than we were sixty years ago. And the general population is beginning to realize this.

In one survey, [2] 83 percent of Americans say society is not focused on the right priorities, 81 percent say America is too focused on shopping and spending; 88 percent say American society is too materialistic; 74 percent believe excessive materialism is causing harm to the environment. If these numbers are anywhere near correct, there is a powerful base on which to build. (p 162)

Third, and perhaps most hopeful, change has already started and is well under way across our nation and around the world. New forms of business ownership are widespread: ten million Americans work in some 11,000 employee-owned companies; 120 million Americans are co-op members of everything from credit unions to rural electric cooperatives to insurance companies; the top one thousand pension funds own nearly \$5 trillion in assets that can be used to influence corporate decisions on behalf of their members' interests; and cities and states own and earn revenue from their own businesses, for example, the Alaska Permanent Fund, which distributes oil profits as dividends (\$3269 in 2008) to every state resident. The international social movements for change (eg the World Social Forum), while widely ignored in America's mainstream media, are stronger than many imagine and will grow still stronger.

What I find most hopeful in Speth's book is the wide range of suggestions for action at every level:

- personal changes in lifestyle (most of us reading this will have to cut consumption significantly) to even make possible a no-growth, ecologically sustainable society,
- spiritual/social education about how to strengthen family and social connectedness,
- the movement toward rooting the economy in local areas,
- organizing to push for measures that guarantee good, well-paying jobs and minimize layoffs and job insecurity,
- campaigns to modify corporate structure in order to significantly reduce corporate power and inject social values into the decision-making process,
- changes in government to make our democracy more responsive to the people and resistant to the power of corporations and,
- even changes in the way we measure economic activity so that we get what we want (human well-being) rather than "growth."

To be sure, we must not give up the immediate and urgent efforts to address directly climate change and the other environmental crises. But at the same time, we must begin a much broader movement to reorient our society towards our common values. Those who care most about the earth (or poverty, or inequality, or oppression) must recognize that economic and political reform are *their* issues, too. For example, public financing of campaigns (probably the only way to substantially change the influence of money in politics), limiting the legal “personhood” of corporations and restricting corporate charters, embracing a no-growth economy, redistributing income to assure global equity are now necessary conditions for our future. What is our vision for human society? It includes the primacy of human relationships (especially family), meaningful work, leisure, care for the earth, universal health care, universal education, care for the elderly, global equity, and so on. We can no longer only work for these goals in piecemeal fashion. A Movement to include all of them has already begun. We are invited to join it so the earth may remain hospitable to human life.

[1] Quoted from: Cavanagh, John et al, *Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World is Possible*, Berret-Koehler, San Francisco, 2002, p 124

[2] <http://www.newdream.org/about/pdfs/Finalpollreport.pdf>