

Neo-liberals in green clothing: Nordhaus, Shellenberger and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors

Contributed by Lorna Salzman
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Editor's note: this exposé by Lorna Salzman reveals (1) how some pollsters relegate environmentalist values to low-priority status in poor competition with social values, and (2) the reviewed book concealed that its philosophical message emanated from those unmentioned polls. Such fraud and manipulation contributes to "liberal" becoming "neo-liberal." - JL

BOOK REVIEW: Break Through

Authors: Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger

Published by Houghton Mifflin Corp., 2007

Category: Fiction

Suggested subtitle: Partial Earth Catalog

Most Revealing Quote: "We are as gods, and might as well get good at it" (Stewart Brand).

Rating: FR (Fraud; Recycle)

Summary of plot: Two Kids Bash the Nattering Nabobs of Environmental Negativism, Invoke the Spirits (Good and Evil) of Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, Francis Fukuyama, Abraham Maslow, Barry Commoner, Stewart Brand, Friedrich Nietzsche, among others, Fight Off those Pesky Demons of Reality, Revive the Power of Positive Thinking, and Soothe the Troubled Minds of Environmentalists by Defining the World's Problems Out of Existence, Thus Easing Their Guilt over the Destruction of the Planet.

Oh Brave New World, sing the authors, as they wave their magic Soma wand and go on to dispel the notion of pollution and criticize conservation biologists for wanting to save the remnant Amazon forest. The REAL problem, they assert with unwarranted certainty, is how to bring the American brand of Prosperity to everyone else, at which time people will then have the time and luxury to worry their pretty heads about the destruction of the planet and its ecosystems.

So: Prosperity Is the Answer... but what was the question? You will not find it in this book. However, the authors have inadvertently given me grounds for a hunch, which I'll reveal later on.

The New Negativists

N&S join the ranks of cranky contrarians like William Cronon and Gregg Easterbrook, who present themselves as progressives rather than outright destroyers or deniers, thus endearing themselves to liberals who might otherwise (especially if they read the whole book) suspect them of being moles from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), seeing as their analyses and prescriptions come eerily close to those of the AEI and the neo-conservatives, not to mention Pres. Bush, and, ironically, those of the Marxist left, apparently contradictory schools of thought that in fact converge on close scrutiny.

N&S rewrite history

But what becomes evident is that these cheerleaders for technology, globalization, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) know nothing whatsoever about either ecology or the origins and history of the American environmental movement. They think it began as a sidebar to movements like civil rights, ignoring its philosophical roots in the 19th century, expounded by Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, and especially ignoring the huge intellectual expansion of the movement from its conservation roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, laid down by hunters and people like Teddy Roosevelt, to the radical ecological thinking of Dave Brower, founder of Friends of the Earth, the "deep ecology" movement represented by George Sessions, Bill Devall, Dave Foreman and Earth First, and the bioregionalists such as Kirkpatrick Sale, David Haenke and others.

Yet despite their amazingly ahistorical view, or perhaps in defiance of a history that might falsify their cockeyed theories, they aspire to be the maharishis of a new Human Potential movement, a la Scientology, today's Norman Vincent Peale of the liberal middle class. Thus, their book is rife with expressions like "self realization," "survival mode," "fulfillment mode," "psychographic," and other words more suited to their profession of social science polling than to a serious discussion of

what is needed to rescue the planet.

Neo-liberals disguised as greens

On the surface, N&S seem to have joined the corporate/right-wing chorus of true believers in the American consumer capitalist dream,, where the Green Mall of America can be enjoyed by all without restraint or guilt -- the modern day Soma of Huxley's Brave New World, no Rx needed. If they aren't on the payroll of AEI or the WTO, they should be hired by them on the spot, where their credentials (founders of something called Environics... Oh Brave New World!) might bring a shred of liberal credibility. Or, if this fills them with horror, they might find their political soul mates -- the environmental sceptics -- in places like Z magazine or the Trotskyites. They would find a niche in either of these extremes, if one really believes that THEY believe what they write.

Curiously, they take global warming and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest very seriously (though badly misinterpreting the position of John Terborgh, a leading conservation biologist, on how to preserve the Amazon forest); their courageous, though Politically Incorrect, critique of the Environmental Justice movement is right on the mark as is their support for the Cape Wind project in Massachusetts. But they deal with these other issues by, in effect, saying they are not "environmental" problems, though they do not explain why. Rather than acknowledging (beyond global warming and the Amazon) environmental problems, they charge environmentalism with opposing any and all human intervention in or manipulation of nature. This is utter nonsense of course, and only reveals their lack of familiarity with the movement and its objectives. It also reinforces my hunch.

The worst of it is that their professed concern for global warming and deforestation bestows a level of credibility upon them that they in no way deserve. In effect, their book functions as a seemingly legitimate attack on environmentalism since it presents itself as coming from well-intentioned progressives.

Marching on the same path to disaster

While continuing the drum beat about how environmentalism separates humans from nature, the Good News Bears bring us some glad tidings: Growth is Good. Environmentalism is Bad (because it opposes growth). Growth isn't a problem. Lack of prosperity is. America has the talent, initiative, and confidence to solve all these problems, which of course aren't really problems even if environmentalists say they are. And so forth.

The authors say we need a new environmental politics. But they don't tell us what kind. In fact this book is not about politics at all. Like their brethren in the social sciences, it is about human attitudes and values, devoid of any ecological, political or ethical context or for that matter historical influence. In fact they take few positions on anything except growth; the book is morally and politically neutral.

Lining up with the misguided left and right simultaneously

Besides their handful of irrelevant and counterproductive ideas, the authors offer no solutions beyond those that are faith-based on consumer capitalism. Having dismissed the notion that there is any basis in reality for environmental concerns, they urge us to Think Positively and embrace what the technocrats and corporate globalization proponents offer us: the shoving of ecological sensibility to the back burner in favor of a single-minded focus on Prosperity. This ends up being a variation on the old leftist theme that social justice must take priority over environment, whether they intended this or not.

N&S to America: No worries, mate!

The choral recapitulation: We don't have to do anything differently, We don't need to consume less, We don't have to reform our economic or industrial system. We don't have to suffer or sacrifice to halt global warming (which isn't pollution anyway, they say, thus supporting the Bush view). These possibilities never enter their consciousness. Environmentalism, they imply, was an inexplicable aberration, essentially a fiction, that, in deriding human control over nature, SEPARATED humans from the rest of nature. So presumably, when humans embrace technology and the pursuit of the Almighty Dollar or euro, they will be re-inserting themselves in nature. HMMMM... This is something to ponder.

N&S are not the only people extant who know nothing about the origins or motivations of the environmental movement. Indeed, one of their most absurd charges against the movement comes when they ask, in all seriousness, why there was no such movement hundreds of years ago. The implication here is that all the problems that people faced in history - workplace injuries, smoke and smog from burning things like coal, etc. - were no different from those of today, and therefore, since no organized opposition appeared to fight them, clearly these problems are not environmental problems,

so, they suggest, what is all the fuss about?

N&S nonsensical narrative

The ignorance that underlies this book is in fact revealed with greatest clarity in part one of chapter one, entitled The Politics of Limits, which says:

"In the late 1960s, a new social movement swept through American political life. Earlier that decade, Rachel Carson's Silent Spring woke America to the danger of pesticides. Smog was choking Los Angeles and other cities. And in 1969, pollution on the surface of Cleveland's Cuyahoga River burst into flames. ...Modern environmental organizations emerged in response to these newly visible consequences of industrialization. The Sierra Club transformed itself from a quiet hikers' club to a lobbying powerhouse. Two years later (was) founded the Natural Resources Defense Council to bring the full weight of scientific and legal expertise to bear on environmental policy. And on April 22, 1970, twenty million Americans celebrated the first Earth Day. The modern environmental movement was born....Public outrage at these new pollution problems, coupled with the environmental movement's deft use of science, lobbying, grassroots organizing, and the courts, led Congress to pass and presidents to sign dozens of environmental policies into law... By the end of the 1970s, the United States had protected millions of acres of wilderness and public land, dramatically improved air and water quality throughout the nation, and established the strongest environmental protections of any nation on earth."

This is an abridged but quite accurate description of what actually took place in the 20th century, as I can personally testify, having worked as an environmental organizer, writer, teacher, and activist, both as a grassroots volunteer and as a professional employee of leading national environmental organizations, since the mid-1960s.

But N&S say: "...while most of the facts commonly marshaled to tell the environmentalist birth story are technically correct, the overall narrative is wrong."

N&S are the ones who are wrong. Not only are they wrong but they reveal themselves to be, politically and philosophically, among the most anti-environmental individuals of our day, scarcely better than the James Watts and the George Bushes. Or I could be kind and say that they are simply neutral on the environment and don't think it is meaningful to take a position. In other words, they are fence sitters who think that the jury is still out on ecology.

Buying the neo-liberal capitalist model

But in fact they are acting as merchants of mendacity and deceit, and all the worse because their book's ideas are being touted as a purportedly new dialogue and potentially a new environmental politics, even as they endorse, support and promote the very forces and institutions -- untrammeled economic growth and institutions like the WTO and the IMF -- that are contributing to the dismantling of the ecosystems of the earth on which human societies depend for survival (not to mention the growing economic inequities and the western consumer lifestyle grown fat on the backs of the poor in foreign countries).

N&S earlier nonsense

So now on to my hunch. N&S's first publication, "The Death of Environmentalism," came out a few years back. It was a presentation to an environmental funders' conference and sounded like no more than a plea to the funders to stop funding the usual environmental groups and fund them instead. The authors stated that it was the result of interviews with a large number of environmentalists with a wide range of opinions and backgrounds; this format made the book little more than a set of coarsely chopped opinions thrown into the blender like a fruit smoothie, the conclusion to which was the authors' conviction that the movement was dead. (Their definition of movement included only the well-funded national and Washington DC-based groups such as the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, and their ilk, while local and regional citizens' groups and issue-focused community efforts were entirely disregarded).

The N&S con game

N&S are part of something called American Environics, an affiliate of a Canadian group, Environics. These are described as "social values research organizations," or, in vernacular terms, psychologically driven public polling companies. So they fit into the social sciences, and as such, they are completely outside of the environmental movement. Thus, these firms, their subcontractors (such as the Roper polls) and their researchers, and the overall thrust of their work, have no sympathy for or grounding in hands-on environmental activism.

This becomes crystal clear on reading either of the N&S books. The writers are not only outsiders, literally and figuratively, but are one step removed, ethically, scientifically and philosophically, from any aspect of environmentalism. They are completely neutral because they are context-free. As psychological pollsters, they remain aloof, by choice impartial witnesses to the ecological maelstrom and debates around them. No romance about the spiritual aspect of nature, no leftist dogma about social justice, and, worst, no scientific understanding of what the word Ecology entails.

Thus, the authors occupy a huge intellectual void, and out of this void they have written a tome manifesting ecological ignorance to a degree that would embarrass even a press release writer for Exxon.

The fraud uncovered

Why and how did this happen? Here is my hunch: The book is not just the rumblings and grumblings of a couple of smarmy kids wanting to make a stir and a few bucks from being contrarians. My first guess was that like their first book, it was also a compendium of ideas, opinions and critiques of other people, gleaned perhaps by the authors but also by other pollsters. The book is a kind of literary junk DNA, wandering everywhere and doing nothing; it is a collection of disparate hodge-podge assertions having nothing to do with one another; it doesn't even land in any political pasture or develop even a minimal formula for an environmental politics. All this led me initially to suspect that the writers plagiarized, with permission but anonymously, the ideas of numerous people across the spectrum, conducting interviews as they did for "The Death of Environmentalism."

Who were these people likely to be, I asked myself. First, they were likely NOT to be overtly anti-environmental, but people who claim to be pro-environment, concerned about global warming, supportive of renewable energy, lovers of the outdoors, people who favor recycling, healthy food, and all the rest. But it is also likely that they are people who, while professing to be pro-environment, may have had some adverse impact in their life, workplace or profession from environmental activism and advocacy.

Maybe one of them was a small business owner who didn't like the extra work and costs of accepting returnable bottles. Or maybe it was someone who resents activists who oppose nuclear power, which he thinks will bring cheaper energy. Or maybe it was someone in the resort or travel industry who is worried about the backlash against automobiles and highways. We all know people like this; alas, they probably represent a good number of the American public, the ones who favor middle of the road solutions that won't cost them any money or bring inconvenience. And many of them are among the most vocal critics.

So I began to suspect that it was such people who were thrown together to make a subtle case against environmentalism, and if true, it would make the book a revoltingly dishonest work written by environmental poseurs who had few ideas of their own. Given the provenance of the authors, their first book, their professional background, and the jagged presentation, I felt my suspicions were well founded.

The wizard uncloaked

Having reached this conclusion, I decided at that point to look up American Environics on the web. Eureka! The answer jumped out at me off the screen when I found their 2004 report entitled Toward a New Ecological Majority, which Environics prepared and presented to Earthjustice, with support from the Nathan Cummings Foundation. This report is their book in microcosm; the authors clearly took the results of the Roper poll that was used as the foundation of the research and simply expanded it into book form. That's all, folks!

So let's look at this report. If you buy the book you can crosscheck the terms and subjects I mention below against this report.

Here are some of its statements, based on a 2500-person, 600-item "social values survey" fielded by Roper for Environics, something it has done for them every four years since 1992.

Environics says: "To create this Road Map, American Environics conducted a psychographic (sic) segmentation based on environmentalist identity, the value Ecological Concern, and a set of demographic variables strongly correlated with being part of the Ecological Base." (Note the terms psychographic, environmentalist identity, Ecological Concern, and Ecological Base).

"Americans are increasingly oriented toward survival values (Ecological Fatalism, Anomie and Aimlessness, Acceptance of Violence) and away from fulfillment values (e.g. Ecological Concern, Civic Engagement, Introspection and Empathy)." Check these terms out in the index as well as in the text of various chapters.

"Environmental groups are not fully activating the Ecological Base... Except for the Ecological Base, every psychographic segment, including those closest to the Ecological Base, holds values more strongly (than) Ecological Concern." The authors make much of this in the book.

Psychos... that is psychographics

The report then moves on to Recommendations, including these:

"Create Strategic Initiatives that inspire a sense of optimism among survival-oriented Americans in the short-term -- and

that result in rising financial security over the long-term... Create Strategic Initiatives that activate values that are more strongly held than Ecological Concern and that create new non-environmentalist ecological identities."

Here we finally get the complete picture and the reasoning behind the book's recommendations for more growth and prosperity: because a group of 2,500 people expressed these opinions in answer to 600 questions developed by a group of social scientists and pollsters, these are being presented by the book authors as FACTS. Because a good number of those polled were minimally interested in the environment, N&S have taken the liberty of saying that the environmental movement should abandon its OWN objectives and pursue those that N&S THINKS you should favor, based on the poll. In other words, drop what you are doing and do what I think you should do because the polls don't lie.

Defrauding the public

For those of you who have observed or participated in debates and dialogue about the relationship of socio-economic justice, jobs, and development to the environment, this will not come as a surprise. But instead of identifying these preferences as those expressed in a public poll, the writers have CONCEALED this fact and present their analysis and conclusions as their own informed opinion. This is one of the biggest con games ever perpetrated, when you think about it. N&S aren't even expressing their OWN opinions in their book! They have taken the statements of those polled and presented them as serious and meaningful assertions about the character and condition of the environmental movement. I would argue that this constitutes fraud.

Space age inspiration

I would like to conclude by providing some of the flavor of this book with actual quotes, including a revelatory one by Stewart Brand, the originator of the Whole Earth Catalog that was first published in 1968 (triggered by Brand's acid trip) with later updates. The quote itself (see above and below) gives a large clue to which side of the fence the authors ultimately come down on. The conclusions of Environics and the philosophy of Stewart Brand fuse neatly together in the book.

N&S identify Brand as "one founding father of environmentalism, who long ago broke from the politics of limits". Wrong again. True to his role as sci-fi gadfly, Brand did oppose the idea of limits but he and his catalog were incidental and peripheral to the actual environmental movement. The Whole Earth Catalog was part of many simultaneous phenomena of that period, motivated not by the loss of the earth's ecological integrity -- which truly WAS the concern of environmentalism -- but rather by men walking on the moon, the advance of electronic communication and computers, discoveries in the world of genetics and DNA research, and all the other paraphernalia hyped by sci-fi and space colony enthusiasts.

[Editor's note: my recollection of the Whole Earth Catalog is that it was about useful, low-tech products; I noted that its successor Whole Earth Review favored high-tech approaches than grassroots environmentalists generally do not. - JL]

Holes in Whole Earth

Indeed, most of what Brand preached was antithetical to the ecological view, focused single-mindedly not on ecosystems, the biosphere, biological relationships, or even the concept of nature, but on ESCAPING from earthly exigencies and constraints with the aid of advanced technology... the ultimate in the manipulation of nature which N&S so highly value.

Significantly, the authors take Brand's quote from an article by John Tierney in the New York Times of Feb 27, 2007, entitled "An Early Environmentalist Embraces 'New Heresies'." John Tierney happens to be one of the leading environmental cynics and opponents extant. He is a sourpuss neo-conservative who never misses the opportunity to disparage or belittle environmentalism. It is revealing to find N&S taking their lead from Tierney, who, along with Brand, rejects the concept of the limits to growth.

Those who revere Brand should look at Jane and Michael Stern's review, in the Dec. 9, 2007 New York Times Book Review, of "Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism" by Andrew Kirk. Kirk claims, according to the reviewers, that Brand's catalog was "a catalyst for the ecology movement... the voice of a new kind of environmental advocacy that, rather than shunning science as nature's enemy [my comment: the movement never shunned science], embraced it as the key that could unlock the door to personal freedom and create a post-scarcity social utopia." This statement alone most accurately characterizes Break Through's mindset.

Smearing environmentalism

Some quotes from Break Through:

"...environmentalism is hobbled by its resentment of human strength and our desire to control nature, and liberalism by its resentment of wealth and power. The morality of self-creation offers environmentalists and liberals alike the recognition of wealth, power, and self-mastery as virtuous, not evil."

"...(there will be) a global NIMBYism that see the planet as too fragile to support the hopes and dreams of seven billion humans. It will seek to establish and enforce the equivalent of an international caste system in which the poor of the developing world are consigned to energy poverty in perpetuity. This politics of limits will be anti-immigration, anti-globalization, and anti-growth... It will combine Malthusian environmentalism with Hobbesian conservatism... On the other side will be those who ... will be pro-growth, progressive, and internationalist. It will drive global development by creating new markets. It will see in institutions like the WTO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund not a corporate conspiracy to keep people poor and destroy the environment, but an opportunity to drive the kind of development that is both sustainable and equitable... nor will we renounce our desire to control nature... we have risen, not fallen. In the words of one founding fathers of environmentalism (Brand) who long ago broke from the politics of limits: "We are as gods, and might as well get good at it."

"...there is no political authority higher than humankind itself. Whether we like it or not, humans have become the meaning of the earth."

"...overcoming global warming... demands unleashing human power... and remaking nature..."

If you don't want to buy the book, rest assured that these quotes by themselves give an accurate reflection of Break Through.

Note: N&S' Breakthrough Institute is a project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. This clarifies what they stand for more than anything they write.

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Culture Change volunteer editor Dan Bednarz adds,

Break Through is a perfect example of cultural lag as outlined by William Catton Jr. in his classic book *Overshoot*. In essence, Nordhaus and Shellenberger are restating -- actually channeling wishful public sentiment, it seems -- about the Age of Exuberance, when the cultural belief of an ever-expanding frontier of natural resources and limitless human aspirations developed. Break Through is a gasp at restating the illusion/cultural myth of economic growth that keeps us dissociated from the ecological limits that are now pressing down on us.

Messers. Nordhaus and Shellenberger want us to believe our dilemmas with water, soil, energy, etc, derive from how we think about the world instead of how we've lived in the world and consumed its bounty. It is highly unlikely they will be able to outline a thought process to solve these problems. Charlie Hall at SUNY-Syracuse has explained that because energy has been needed to run the economy, maintain and repair the economy, and to grow the economy, less net energy = no growth, and this means possible socioeconomic breakdown. What would Nordhaus and Shellenberger say to this?

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Funding for N&S and their Breakthrough project is huge -- especially for a couple of ex-Headwaters Forest activists (that I never met or heard of in my 12 years close to that campaign - JL): "\$100K has been made available by the Nathan Cummings foundation to promote N&S's new book and to foment debate. There's another grant to Breakthrough for \$375K from Cummings that is also tied to the new book. Here's the source. It is the Nathan Cumming's grant recipients list":

nathancummings.net

[Apollo Alliance, N&S's brainchild, gets a \$200k grant from Cummings to be used in four months. These grants show the rewards of singing the technofix message, however bogus it is. - ed.]

- courtesy Scott Silver of Wild Wilderness:
wildwilderness.org