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21st century enlightenment

Review: Nihilistic development

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Nihilistic development

ULTIMATE SECURITY: THE ENVIRONMENTAL BASIS OF POLITICAL STABILITY

by Norman Myers

W. W. Norton, 308 pages, £17.95, \$25

MORTGAGING THE EARTH: THE WORLD BANK, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPOVERISHMENT AND THE CRISIS OF DEVELOPMENT

by Bruce Rich

Earthscan, 376 pages, £14.95

These two books are at the same time very different in their treatment of the environmental problems the world faces and yet very similar in their messages and conclusions. They are both brilliantly written by authors pre-eminently knowledgeable in their fields and displaying lateral thinking dramatic in its effect, an holistic approach in the broadest sense of the term. Both point out the folly of our present course of action and the needless suffering caused by our pursuit of what Bruce Rich describes as the last modern ideology, development. They also both touch on the metaphysical nature of the environment and development dilemma.

There is a real paradox in the nihilistic nature of economic growth as we currently understand the term. Both books show clearly how the burdens of over-exploitation of the environment have fallen disproportionately upon the poor, while the benefits have gone to the already rich. In this way, far from alleviating poverty economic growth has actually led to its increase, instability, lack of security and armed conflict, the very ills that development was supposed to prevent.

The preface to *Ultimate Security* opens with the pessimistic admission that this was the most difficult of books to write. As one reads more the reason for this difficulty and for the underlying pessimism becomes apparent. It contains detailed descriptions of difficult and inhospitable country and contains glimpses of Elysian fields beyond. The difficult and inhospitable country it describes is of environmental insecurity, from the toppling a ruler descended from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba of a proud and never colonised nation in the first coup driven by environmental causes, to the synergistic environmental discontinuity of unknown unknowns. The Elysian fields one glimpses are of a state in which this environmental insecurity is replaced, by a little effort and much vision, with environmental security. Many chapters end with contrasting downbeat and upbeat scenarios. These display many of the blackest possibilities of environmental insecurity while pointing out how unnecessary it all is. The downbeat scenario which comes first tends to be both longer and more detailed than the upbeat. This makes for a powerful and doom laden book which cannot and should not be dismissed.

Unfortunately, the assertion that 'Those who don't under-

stand could have it explained to them fifty times and still would not hear the message' is all too true and there are all too many of them. Rich's book makes clear just how deeply this lack of understanding has been entrenched in the most pervasive of the world's development institutions since their foundation at Bretton Woods on the axiom of infinite natural resources feeding limitless increases in prosperity. Indeed, this critique of the policies and work of the bank provides a microcosm of the dilemmas portrayed by Myers. The learning by doing approach of the Bank criticised by Rich is a subset of the global scale experiment with planet earth, an experiment which is largely unplanned and where we have very little idea of the eventual outcome.

If environmental security is to be achieved, then Myers argues we need to redefine security and determine how we can gain it without resorting to force. In a parallel argument Rich argues that we need to redefine development away from material growth and towards a steady state economy. The problem is not shortage of money but shortage of vision. Both books paint clear visions of environmental destruction and how it may be achieved. In doing so both authors draw on metaphysical poets, Rich looking to Goethe's *Faust* while Myers, perhaps more optimistically, draws on John Donne. This looking back over the centuries implies that we have lost the answers we once had. Rich makes this explicit in quoting Ronald Coase's discovery that for nearly four centuries British lighthouses had been privately funded when distinguished economists argued that they were a public good that it was impracticable to build and administer privately. These books may help us to avoid the blackest predictions of environmental insecurity. While neither provides a clear workable plan to achieve their goals, both suggest that such a plan could exist.

While Norman Myers establishes the theoretical existence of the Elysian fields of environmental security, their achievement remains a dream. He postulates that a way round the difficult country must exist, but whether they are ever reached depends much upon human nature. Rich suggests that much of what is necessary may be achieved by the combined actions of concerned individuals and much of his criticism of the World Bank refers to its systematic denial of individual involvement. The success or failure of such an approach lies in human nature. Myers both overestimates and underestimates human nature. The suggestion, even in part, that like latter day Sampsons, environmental refugees will flock to developed nations because they can be seen as the principal cause of environmental decline is fanciful. Refugees for the most part look to escape oppression not to bring the oppression to their oppressors. The latter is often the final act of those who see no sanctuary and so have nothing left to lose. The point that we have only just enough time to turn the potential environmental disaster into the opportunity of security is made repeatedly. In some ways this is the ultimate optimism: we have no real idea how much time

we actually do have and because neither book puts forward a clear workable plan for achieving its desired ends we can have no idea how long this will take. In reality life seldom turns out either as badly as we fear or as well as we hope. The problem with such a *laissez faire* attitude is that, as both authors make clear, the middle, business as usual, course will not avoid unacceptable levels of environmental damage.

DR MALCOLM AICKIN
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A restorative economy

THE ECOLOGY OF COMMERCE: HOW BUSINESS CAN
SAVE THE PLANET

by Paul Hawken

Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 220 pages, £17.99

This book provides excellent ballast for all those who have taken an interest in the RSA's *Tomorrow's Company Inquiry*. It challenges the traditional criteria of commercial success and examines how industry and business could operate and be measured against broader criteria which deliver positive environmental, social and economic benefits.

Paul Hawken, one of America's leading entrepreneurs, takes a long hard look at how business can integrate economic, environmental and social systems to create a sustainable method of commerce. While praising individual company efforts, he argues that long-term sustainability will not be achieved unless the framework and institutions surrounding commerce are redesigned. The book's success lies in the fact that Hawken has been on both sides of the fence: a highly respected American business man whose awards include 'Twelve Best Entrepreneurs of the 1980s' and 'Creative Visionary Award', he is now a campaigner for green policies.

It would be a loss if readers of this review were to consign this book as one for the environmental specialist, for it is broad enough in its evaluation of the challenges facing tomorrow's company to be of value to everyone with an interest in the future of economic and commercial patterns. The most important message to emerge from the book is that business now faces more rapid and dramatic environmental, social and economic change than ever before, and that it must respond with equally dramatic and fundamental changes in its practices. 'It is not enough to say that business should be more ethical, or that we should use recycled materials and encourage car-pooling. What is required is a total redesign of what it means to be in business at the latter stages of the twentieth century.'

After outlining the truly awful consequences of continuing along our current path ('The immune system of every unborn child in the world will soon be adversely and irrevocably

affected by the persistent toxins in our food, air and water'), Hawken addresses the central question: 'Can we create profitable, expandable companies that do not destroy, directly or indirectly, the world around them?' He argues that yes, we can; not through the imposition of any 'environmental master plan', but rather by rethinking the fundamental values against which success is measured. He states that 'No "plan" to reverse environmental degradation can be enacted if it requires a wholesale change in the dynamics of the market. We have to work with who we are - which includes our strong instinct to shop the market and buy products of comparable quality at the lowest price'.

Hawken points out that businesses still operate according to 19th century colonial models based on exploiting natural resources to provide a product at the cheapest price. And there, he argues, lies business' existing dilemma; it cannot be expected to function well if environmental controls are simply imposed on the existing system: 'Today business... is being forced to respond to conflicting signals. On the one hand, it is asked to deliver goods to the marketplace at the lowest possible price; on the other, it is asked to assume the 'new' costs of environmental stewardship. If it performs the first function too well, it is held accountable and punished by government, if not by public opinion, because it cannot achieve the lowest price without some or many forms of environmental and societal compromises. If it performs the latter function well, its costs may be raised so high that it suffers in the marketplace.'

What is required, argues Hawken, is a move to a 'restorative economy', which he defines as one that achieves the following: 'We must reunite the concept of efficiency to include both natural and human communities, a union that is inherent in the true concept of economy, but has been set aside in its present practice. Because efficiency should be the common ground between economics and ecology, it represents the bridge to a restorative economy.' Coupled with US Vice President Al Gore's recent book, *Earth in the Balance*, (reviewed in the October 1992 issue of the *Journal*), this book indicates the seriousness with which these issues are being addressed in the US, and should leave UK industry and government in no doubt of the importance of the message.

This is a very accessible book, and one that is full of stimulating ideas and observations. I was left with one crucial phrase imbedded on my consciousness: 'Industrialism is over; the question remains how we organize the economy that follows.' It is a question that too few policy makers have addressed. Society and industry need to rethink the system to enable a restorative economy to flourish without compromising human and ecological values. This book addresses the issue honestly and intelligently, and provides the basic building blocks of a model which should be further explored by industry, government and society alike. Hawken's refreshingly positive approach should also be emulated, as he argues that business is more likely to succeed if, rather than penalised