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Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility by Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger

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BOOK REVIEW

BREAK THROUGH:

FROM THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM TO THE POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY

by Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger

Reviewed by Emily Alves*

The environmental community is at a crossroads. After decades of advocating for safeguards for nature and conservation of resources, the entire movement has exhausted its traditional methods of achieving victories. The inability to implement a widely accepted system of capping global carbon emissions is an example of this dead end. If the movement is to continue on and make further progress, then it will need to break out of its interest group mode and seek alliances to advocate for ideas that environmentalism has been unfamiliar with thus far.

Nordhaus and Shellenberger caused a controversial stir with their 2004 article “The Death of Environmentalism.” *Break Through* seeks to expand upon those ideas, demonstrating how the environmental movement has fallen into the trap of becoming just another interest group, and outlining a path towards progressive, effective policy making. Nordhaus and Shellenberger state that their ultimate goal is to help the community reach its desired end.

The first half of the book, ‘The Politics of Limits,’ explains how for decades, the movement has been driven by concern for one issue and utilizing a single, unoriginal approach. Viewing their mission as the stewards of the environment, environmental advocates have sought to staunch human activity in the name of preserving our lands, water, and air. Advocates have acquired these goals by pushing through lawsuits and legislation, claiming that public support is on their side by citing poll after poll where a majority of Americans state that the environment is a top concern for them. Victories such as the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act have instilled in the environmental community the belief that these small-scale methods will continue to be effective against massive problems, such as global warming.

Nordhaus and Shellenberger argue that environmentalists are mistaken on several points, and are wasting valuable time and resources as a result. The authors argue that environmentalists are far off base regarding the human aspect of their cause. By championing the rights of nature over the rights of human progress, the community does not recognize the fact that the movement got its start as a ‘post-material need’ for humanity.

Having satisfied the minimal levels of need—food, shelter, and physical safety—citizens of the Western world have shifted their focus to post-material ones, such as self-fulfillment and a sense of belonging. These post-material instincts are what trigger the desire in people to invest in our natural surroundings. Humans have achieved this level of need due to the immense progress made in the last few centuries. Therefore, it is extremely counter-intuitive for most people when environmentalists proclaim that the only way to preserve nature is to halt the human progress that has brought them to a point where they are even able to consider nature as a priority.


The authors use a case study of Brazil to illustrate this point. Environmentalists are constantly trying (and failing) to stem the deforestation of the Amazon. The authors contrast these efforts with the millions of direly poor Brazilians living either in the overcrowded *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and San Paulo or in the secluded villages of the Amazon. The message that nature is superior and in perfect harmony, and we humans must not disrupt this harmony, does not resonate with those seeking to make a living for themselves. Even in the United States, demanding that citizens curtail the very activities that have brought them security in the name of maintaining or restoring the damage inflicted on nature while we were evolving is counter-intuitive and difficult to sell. For all the small scoped victories environmentalists have achieved in the name of nature, tackling the global issues simply cannot be done with these overtones and tactics that are not winning over the hearts and minds of the majority of the population.

Nordhaus and Shellenberger then spend the second half of the book, “The Politics of Possibility,” proposing methods that the environmental community can still pursue in order to achieve their more lofty goals. As with all single interest groups, environmentalists must seek to expand their appeal. The best way to

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do this is to take up issues that will achieve environmental quality while allowing humans to do what they do best—innovate and progress. The doomsday scenarios of fatal weather patterns must be set aside, and replaced with promising predictions of the innovative future that will ameliorate these conditions. Alliances must be formed with groups traditionally unallied with the environmentalists, such as the United Auto Workers or the insurance industry, to advance fuel efficiency standards and increase public health awareness. Concessions will have to be made in order to meet the majority of the environmentalists' goals. The new path will have to entail engaging in progressive, market based

solutions that will allow citizens to feel that they are working to improve their standards of living.

The authors then suggest their plan for an Apollo project for clean energy, a proposal that would invest \$300 billion in energy technologies over the next ten years. This proposal would simultaneously generate an additional \$200 billion in private capital and add about three million new jobs to the market, all while discovering the most efficient environmentally friendly fuel technology. It is solutions such as these that will allow environmentalists to leave their single issue, superior politics in the past and embrace a multifaceted, progressive politics of the future. 

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