

Green Day

To fight climate change, progressives need a vision of the future that's worth fighting for.

BREAK THROUGH: FROM THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM TO THE POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY BY TED NORDHAUS & MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER
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The phrase “the essay caused a sensation” has not exactly appeared with excessive frequency in recent decades. But three years ago, a pair of environmental activists wrote an essay called “The Death of Environmentalism,” and the essay did, in fact, cause a sensation. The Internet-published treatise, by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, who are active on the left in environmental consulting and polling, was widely debated in policy circles and even earned the Old Media’s greatest accolade, coverage in the *New York Times*. Now the authors have expanded their essay into a book, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, hoping to widen the audience for their ideas.

Why did an essay called “The Death of Environmentalism” attain the lime-light? Partly because its title sounds so negative. Most environmentalists and most reporters who cover environmentalism adore the negative. Cries of doom,

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prophecies of collapse—there is probably a contingent of environmentalists and environmental journalists who feel cheated that some manmade catastrophe has not yet wiped out Western civilization. To this faction, a paper claiming the destruction of environmentalism itself had appeal. Environmentalists also prefer to see themselves as powerless voices in the wilderness, opposed by unstoppable corporate steamrollers, though actually environmentalism has become one of the country’s potent political lobbies. Titled as it was, “The Death of Environmentalism” seemed to say that environmentalism had lost political clout. Environmental activists predict doom about environmentalism! Hard to think of anything more PC.

But “The Death of Environmentalism” was the reverse of PC—brimming with cheerfulness. What was dying, Nordhaus and Shellenberger contended, was the old model of environmentalism that depicted “the environment” as some distant place to be safeguarded against the footsteps of benighted humanity, with punitive sacrifice the only hope. Traditional environmentalists are fundamentally wrong, the authors contended, to think that “the environment” is a rainforest or wildlife preserve, while the places people live are artificial, or that men and women should bear shame about reengineering the planet. A pristine fjord isn’t “good” while a streetcorner in Brooklyn is “bad,” they reasoned: Both are different aspects of the same biosphere. Human alteration of nature is nothing to be squeamish about, since nature continuously alters itself, whether we act or not. “Fragile environment” is a nonsense phrase—nature has survived ice ages and comet strikes. The living world is not fragile; it’s a green fortress.

Railing against factories and materialism gets environmentalists nowhere, they continued, since everyone needs factories and most want materialism. Short-term pollution is acceptable if it leads to increased national wealth that allows societies to afford clean economies. (This is China’s situation right now.) Economic growth is not dreadful; it is wonderful, because it is accompanied by social liberalization and higher living standards for average people. (This is the situation right now throughout developing nations, and I recommend to readers Benjamin Friedman’s powerful 2005 book, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, which argues that for reasons of justice, the developing world must grow, grow, and grow.)

In short, Nordhaus and Shellenberger’s essay contended that traditional environmental doom-and-gloom has outlived its usefulness. Exaggerated scare tactics about genuine but minor concerns like arsenic in drinking water or airborne mercury, or cooked-up nonsense like electromagnetic fields near power lines or Alar on apples, now backfire, distracting attention from a danger that may be all too real: artificially triggered climate change. Optimism, not doomsday

talk, is what will motivate average people to support additional environmental reforms, such as to counteracting global warming. Nordhaus and Shellenberger urged environmental lobbyists to get rid of their long faces and spread the word about tremendous progress in reducing pollution (it's been declining for the past 30 years, even under George W. Bush) in order to create hope that dramatic progress against climate change is possible, too.

These arguments rang true to me, in no small part because I made them a decade earlier in my book *A Moment on the Earth*, which was subtitled, "The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism." It would have been good manners for the pair to credit that book in theirs, especially because the authors told me in 2005 that *A Moment on the Earth* helped inspire their work. Be that as it may, when my book making some of the same points was published in 1995, clearly I was a fool to believe environmental optimism was about to break out. What was I thinking! Now it's a decade later and Nordhaus and Shellenberger again believe environmental optimism is possible, which brings us to their book.

In *Break Through*, an urgent, engaging work, Nordhaus and Shellenberger sail through the fog of instant-doomsday pessimism to show that environmental reforms succeed, are affordable, help the economy, and tangibly improve people's lives. "Environmentalists continue to preach terrifying stories of ecopocalypse," they write, even though most environmental protection programs have worked and ought to be hailed as success stories for postwar liberal politics. Environmentalists "increasingly shake their fists at human nature," though human nature springs from the natural scheme. "Whether we like it or not," they assert, "human beings have become the meaning of the Earth."

With sharp analysis, wit, and impressive command of detail, the pair dissects the faults of traditional doomsday thinking, then show why optimism about the future is justified. They skewer the wealthy enviro elite who yak about how others should conserve, then oppose wind-energy towers off Cape Cod because they want unspoiled views from their mansions. *Break Through* endorses pragmatic approaches to environmental problems, having no use for ideological warfare. The authors "emphatically disagree" with the doomsayer's belief that ecological problems must get worse before voters will support change—the dialectic underside of the environmental movement that actually longs for bad news about rising sea levels and melting glaciers. "In our view," Nordhaus and Shellenberger write, "things have to get better before they can

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get better.” Immiseration theory, which holds that suffering is the instigator of reform, “has been repeatedly discredited by history.” Postwar progressive events like the Civil Rights Act and the Clean Water Act came during times of prosperity and rising expectations. *Break Through* contends that a booming global economy and good international relations will likewise prepare us to face climate change: The better things become, the better the chance of staving off harmful global warming, which is the book’s leading concern.

While exhibiting keen insight, *Break Through* falters by offering few concrete proposals. Generally, Nordhaus and Shellenberger don’t like proscriptive environmental programs intended to constrain human action; they prefer broadly optimistic programs that seek to inspire creativity and innovation. Specially, they don’t want a greenhouse gas cap-and-trade system, modeled on the cap-and-trade system that has worked well against acid rain, because global warming is a bigger problem than acid rain and thus requires bigger, transformative thinking. Fair enough. But most of the 256 pages of *Break Through* are devoted to what’s wrong with other people’s ideas, while few are spent on what Nordhaus and Shellenberger would have us do instead, other than Make No Little Plans. If even visionaries like Nordhaus and Shellenberger lack much in the way of specific recommendations, it must be that some key element of knowledge is missing from the global warming debate.

Break *Through* makes valuable contributions, but does it offer sufficient reasons for us to believe that environmental optimism is an idea whose time has come? Probably not; note that no presidential contender is speaking the language of hope about the greenhouse issue, though it’s well established that voters like optimistic candidates. There seems to be three significant barriers against environmental optimism, which I’ll offer in ascending order of importance. First is that the media consistently do an awful, terrible, careless, rash, and unsophisticated job of covering environmental issues—actually, that’s sugarcoating it. Most big-media environmental coverage, including in the *New York Times*, reads like stenography for environmental fund-raising, and thus reflects the environmentalists’ preferred lobbying view that everything everywhere is totally negative. In 2001, for example, when President Bush postponed a regulation to strengthen rules about arsenic in drinking water, the *Times* devoted front-page banner-story coverage to a mere postponement, treating it as some kind of general calamity, while Maureen Dowd, writing on the paper’s editorial page, preposterously claimed the president wanted Americans to drink “poisoned” water. Missing from their coverage was any mention of the low magnitude of the risk: Arsenic in drinking water is rare to begin with. Then, when Bush

ultimately imposed the strong regulation, the *Times* buried the inconveniently positive development in a box on page A18. The result is that when the *Times* and other news organizations turn to the major environmental issues where Bush has indeed failed—greenhouse gases and energy policy—media credibility is shot, owing to the Chicken Little syndrome.

The second barrier to environmental optimism is the Democratic Party's blindness to it. After Social Security, environmental protection is government's most important achievement of our lifetime. But you'd never know that from Democratic candidates, who speak nothing but doom-and-gloom on the issue in order to appease environmental fund-raisers. If you want voters to support liberal solutions, you must point to liberal solutions that have worked. Environmental regulations of the last 30 years have brought about spectacular declines in air, water, and toxic pollution; indeed, all major environmental trends other than greenhouse gases are now positive. Yet progressives won't say this, nor has any candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. It's no wonder that public opinion surveys, such as a recent Gallup poll, show that Americans believe pollution is getting worse when actually it's declining—one-third less smog and two-thirds less acid rain than 30 years ago.

The third barrier to optimism is the money problem: No one is in the center of the issue because you can't raise money in the center. Democrats and progressives cry that the world is ending because demonizing raises money. Republicans and conservatives cry that environmental regulations stifle the economy, despite a complete lack of evidence—because such claims are also moneymakers. The optimistic assertion, "Environmental trends are positive because most regulations have worked at low cost, and that's why we should not be afraid to tackle global warming," may sum up what the public needs to know, but it has zero fund-raising punch. Ponder the Washington think-tank landscape: There is no centrist environmental organization, because no one will fund one.

This mental tire-spinning shows in the state of climate-change politics. Even as science increasingly supports the hypothesis that the world is warming (there's a chance warming will produce net benefits, but prudence says we need insurance), only the most modest plans are advancing on Capitol Hill. The president has proposed an international conference aimed at producing non-binding greenhouse gas goals for future decades, which is exactly what George H.W. Bush proposed in 1992. Al Gore, for his part, has made a doom-and-gloom movie that relies exclusively on worst-case projections about global warming, even as it came out that at his own Nashville home, the former vice president uses 20 times as much power as the national household average. At the greener-than-thou Live Earth concerts this past summer, celebrities flew in private jets

to demand that others conserve. Gore exhorted Live Earth audiences to back a treaty mandating a rapid 90 percent reduction in American carbon-dioxide emissions. Announcing this goal may make the Live Earth promoters feel pious, but the target is meaningless for the next few decades at least. Using current technology, a 90 percent reduction in American carbon-dioxide emissions could be achieved only by deep reductions in electricity generation and outright banning of all petroleum use. And if you think Arnold Schwarzenegger will lead us out of the climate-change woods, bear in mind that his supposedly daring California greenhouse-gas initiative does not take effect until he leaves office.

Looked at in the old-fashioned, sour-puss-environmentalist way, the goal of preventing artificially triggered climate change can seem hopeless. In 2004, Stephen Pacala and Robert Socolow of Princeton University, two leading energy researchers, calculated that merely to stabilize atmospheric greenhouse gas accumulation at about half again today's level would require such measures as doubling the number of nuclear power plants while raising average new-vehicle fuel efficiency to 60 MPG, all the while building 100 times more wind turbines than now exist. Numbers like that make it seem any progress at combating artificial global warming will be extremely expensive and inevitably contract the world economy.

That's why the hopeful, future-oriented viewpoint expressed in *Break Through* is so necessary. Based on today's science and economics, climate change might take us down. But that's because the knowledge that will defeat global warming does not yet exist. If you had told a rationalist of 1907 that in 2007 the world would be consuming 80 million barrels of oil per day, the rationalist would have scoffed, "Impossible!" In the reasonably near future, perhaps even in our lifetime, the global energy economy may function using clean energy on a scale that seems impossible today. What's required are breakthroughs in technology, engineering, and economics, and the first step is to price greenhouse gas emissions so that scientists, engineers, and businesspeople can profit by making those breakthroughs. Smog reduction, remember, was widely viewed as "impossible" until financial incentives led to the invention of the three-stage catalytic converter. While others deny the climate change threat or squabble over whose ox should be gored, Nordhaus and Shellenberger are right to look to human ingenuity for the big breakthroughs that will make the impossible possible. ■