

Death Warmed Over

Beyond environmentalism: imagining possibilities as large as the crisis that confronts us

BY MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER AND TED NORDHAUS

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER BEGINS *THE LONG EMERGENCY*, his new book warning that the world is running out of oil, by quoting psychologist Carl Jung as saying, “People cannot stand too much reality.”

The quote is wrongly attributed. It was T.S. Eliot who said, “Humankind cannot stand too much reality.” But the quote and the Jungian slip speak volumes about Kunstler and kindred, well-intentioned progressive authors. Like Jared Diamond’s *Collapse*, which purports to explain why once-powerful societies are driven into extinction, and Tom Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, which faulted Kansans for failing to grasp their own economic self-interest, Kunstler’s book contends that the ignorant masses are suffering from what the left used to call false-consciousness—in this case, about energy consumption. For the people to be saved, they presumably must let go of their irrational consumer, religious, or ideological fantasies and start recognizing their true self-interest.

When this kind of condescension fails to induce the desired behavior change, environmentalists and liberals become angry or bewildered and see the public as irrational, in denial, or just plain foolish. Which reminds us of something Jung actually did say: “If one does not understand a person, one tends to regard him as a fool.”

Today, with all three branches of the federal government in the hands of the radical right, environmental, liberal, and Democratic leaders continue to believe that the public is with us on the issues. “My view is that the Democrats almost won the election,” Kerry media man Bob Shrum said repeatedly after Republicans both re-elected George W. Bush and increased their control of Congress. “I think what we are looking at is the re-birth of environmentalism,” one environmental-group executive told *The New York Times*.

Explain to us again: Who can’t stand too much reality?

WE HAVE SEEN THE ENEMY

Here’s another thing Jung actually said: “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”

This was certainly the case for us. Before writing “The Death of Environmentalism,” the two of us had spent the bulk of our

professional careers becoming increasingly irritated while executing failed environmental strategies. We went on this way for years. But eventually we were reminded of Jung’s great contribution to the understanding of the human mind: that we project our inner demons onto others.

What if the problem was *not* that environmentalists just didn’t get it? What if the problem was that *we* didn’t get it? Maybe there was something about environmentalism (and thus ourselves) that none of us understood.

So, in the summer of 2004, we set off to find out. We proceeded to interview more than two dozen environmental leaders and funders. We read everything about global warming we could get our hands on.

By the time we were through, we had discovered that, indeed, there was more going on than met the eye. When we started our research we believed that there was something wrong *strategically*. What we didn’t comprehend was that something might be wrong *conceptually*.

Treating global warming as an “environmental” problem and framing its solutions as technical, we concluded, lay at the heart of the movement’s political failings.

The problem was not simply that environmentalists didn’t get it. The problem was that environmentalists could *never* get it as long as we remained environmentalists. The way we conceptualized the problem analytically was getting in the way of what we needed to do politically.

We suspected that this finding might irritate some people. But we could no longer pretend that the problems we faced were nothing that a few more media campaigns (stopglobalwarming.com), or even a new name (sustainability), couldn’t fix.

We expected controversy. What we didn’t expect was that the essay would become a projection screen for the hopes and fears of the broader progressive movement. Hence our thesis: Everything that irritates you about “The Death of Environmentalism” can lead you to an understanding of yourself.

DEATH AS A PROJECTION SCREEN

Which brings us to the first reaction, namely that the debate over environmentalism is just so much navel gazing. “We know

what we need to do,” this line of reasoning goes. “Let’s stop all this hand-wringing and get to the hard work of politics.” It reminded us of the insistence by Democratic operatives that John Kerry “almost won” the election. Whenever you hear someone begin a sentence with, “If it weren’t for a few thousand votes in Ohio ...,” you can be pretty sure an argument to stay the course will follow.

Others went so far as to say that our paper gave comfort to the enemy. One environmental leader asserted that there was already a robust debate going on within the environmental movement, and that “Shellenberger and Nordhaus have set that debate back, not moved it forward.” Others, including a former Sierra Club director, were upset not simply that the debate was happening but that it had been triggered by two “eco-nobodies.”

What really seemed to bother the national environmental leadership was the title. Many privately acknowledged that they agreed with much of what we wrote, “But did you have to call it ‘Death?’” they asked. People posted comments to blogs literally insisting that they weren’t dead. In a particularly surreal discussion at Harvard, a fellow panelist attempted to prove environmentalism’s vitality with a PowerPoint presentation that began with the famous clip from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, where a frail, first-century Roman father protests, “I’m not dead! I feel fine!” as he’s heaved onto a passing mortician’s cart by his son. It all illustrated two key points we had made in our essay: that environmentalists are overly literal and that they constantly and unwittingly activate their opponents’ frames.

Many readers couldn’t figure out where we stood in the tired debate between “national” and “grass-roots” environmentalists. Because the object of our analysis was the leadership of the largest organizations and foundations that determine national strategy, many saw in our essay an embrace of grass-roots environmentalism. But others felt we had disrespected grass-roots activists by not holding them up as exemplars of the one true environmental movement.

A few were bothered that we attributed so many of environmentalists’ failures to their incuriosity about the “human” (read: social) sciences, like social psychology, and their scientific fetishization of the “natural” sciences, like climatology and biology. “Mainstream national groups made a lot of progress over the past 40 years by maintaining scientific credibility as a touchstone of their efforts,” one prominent environmental scientist wrote in an open e-mail to environmental leaders and funders. “Environmentalism identified with a scientific, rationalist approach, and drew a larger circle around itself and its positions accordingly.”

Having argued that such “rationalism” is, paradoxically, unscientific, and having proposed ditching the antiquated concepts of “nature” and “the environment,” some suggested that we had gone off the postmodern deep end (tantamount to being French). “How can you save the environment if you don’t believe it exists?” one particularly literal environmental-studies professor asked us shortly after the Monty Python moment at Harvard.

WHAT A CONCEPT

Why do we consider childhood asthma exacerbated by air pollution to be an environmental problem but not asthma exacerbated by lack of treatment? Why is habitat for nonhuman animals an environmental issue while habitat (a.k.a. “housing”) for human animals is not? Why are extinctions caused by meteors considered “natural” but ones caused by humans “unnatural”?

You don’t need a Ph.D. in linguistics to see that there’s something funny about the concept of “the environment.” If the concept includes humans, everything is “environmental,” and it has little use other than being a poor synonym for “everything.” If the concept excludes humans, it is scientifically specious (not to mention politically suicidal).

Environmentalism’s rickety underpinnings worked well enough in the 1960s and ’70s. But the mental model created to deal with smog and create national parks isn’t up to the challenge of dealing with the profoundly complex and global ecological (and political, cultural, and economic) crises of the 21st century. Even if the environmental movement staves off oil drilling in Alaska—where global warming is melting the tundra and making the forests vulnerable to disease—what will remain?

This conceptual point was at the heart of our essay, yet conspicuously ignored by most readers. As a consequence, many misread our reflections on the New Apollo Project as little more than advocacy for a shiny new coalition. What we were attempting to suggest, perhaps poorly, was emphatically *not* that environmentalists should form what political scientist Bill Chaloupka calls “Kumbaya coalitions.” Nor were we suggesting that environmentalists should quit their jobs and start working on other progressive issues like health care, labor, or civil rights.

Rather, we argued that anyone who cares about global warming must speak to the material and nonmaterial aspirations that Americans have for themselves and their country. Treating Apollo as a laundry list of technical policy proposals and endorsing organizations overlooks its potential to create a new politics grounded in vision and values, not problems and issues.

Of course, if we can’t inject Apollo’s vision and values into



contested political space—where politicians and others have to take sides on specific, controversial proposals—Apollo risks going the way of “smart growth,” an idea that everyone is for but nobody understands. The notion that social-change omelettes can be made without breaking political eggs is a fantasy that needs to die along with the notion that dealing with global warming could ever be “above politics.”

By now it should go without saying that we could just as easily have written a “death of” report about any of the special interests that comprise the liberal coalition. The fact that every two years a moribund environmentalism marries itself to a moribund liberalism in an effort to elect Democratic candidates is part of the problem. All of the progressive special interests will continue to fail politically as long as they conceptualize their interests so narrowly and conduct their politics so literally.

For the last 15 years, environmentalists have publicly debated global-warming deniers under the assumption that a) they can actually “win” the debate and b) once the public learns “the facts” things will start to change. What they should have done instead is built support for an agenda that inspires people regardless of whether they believe global warming is real. The result has been politically disastrous: Having rested their agenda on proving the truth of global warming, attacking the science is for the carbon lobby what attacking John Kerry’s war record was for Karl Rove.

And so it came to pass that environmental groups—so intimidated by right-wing attacks on “the science”—refused in late August to publicly connect global warming to Hurricane Katrina, which pummeled New Orleans. “It’s like it’s 1960 and we’re afraid to suggest that cigarettes might be killing people,” one foundation executive lamented in an e-mail to environmental leaders.

It was up to climatologists from MIT and the National Center for Atmospheric Research, who had recently published major studies making the connection between warming oceans and hurricane severity in both *Nature* and *Science*, to put two and two together. With congressional Democrats following the environmentalists’ lead, it was once again left to high-ranking European officials, including Britain’s chief scientist, to criticize the Bush administration.

POST-ENVIRONMENTAL ASPIRATIONS IN THE FACE OF (UN)NATURAL DISASTERS

Environmentalists have spent the last 40 years telling Americans what they can’t have and can’t be without ever telling people what they can have and can be. The new, post-environmental politics must focus more on unleashing human possibility than constraining human activity. If this new, aspirational politics succeeds, Bill McKibben recently wrote, “it won’t be environmentalism anymore. It will be something much more important.”

In all the upset over “The Death of Environmentalism” we, along with former Sierra Club President Adam Werbach, bowed out of the national Apollo Alliance. Since then we have sought new avenues to advance the Apollo concept. Recently we worked with Bracken Hendricks, formerly the executive director of the Apollo Alliance and now a senior fellow at the Breakthrough In-

stitute and the Center for American Progress, to create a proposal for an Automotive Competitiveness and Accountability Act.

With General Motors and Ford teetering perilously close to bankruptcy and hemorrhaging tens of thousands of jobs, Congress may be asked once again to bail out Detroit. After September 11, Congress bailed out the airline industry and demanded nothing in return. This time, Congress should demand accountability.

The act recognizes that American automakers are burdened with massive health-care costs that their foreign competitors, blessed with national health-care systems, don’t have. This competitive disadvantage partly explains Detroit’s failure to invest adequately in research and development and thus produce better vehicles. But Detroit is not free from blame: The Big Three have stubbornly refused to innovate and are now stuck selling gas-guzzlers that fewer Americans want.

What’s needed is a new deal for the auto industry, one that is entirely voluntary. If automakers want help covering the health-care costs of their workers, they must, under the Competitiveness and Accountability Act, increase the efficiency of their vehicles. (A fuller description of the Competitiveness and Accountability Act can be read at www.thebreakthrough.org.)

Countless other opportunities for political innovation emerge once we free ourselves from environmentalism’s assumptions. Consider the way environmentalists have long treated prevention and adaptation as a question of either/or rather than both/and, as though we must choose between caps on greenhouse gases and zoning development away from floodplains. “Do we have so much faith in our own adaptability that we will risk destroying the integrity of the entire global ecological system?” asked Al Gore in his 1992 best seller, *Earth in the Balance*. “Believing that we can adapt to just about anything is ultimately a kind of laziness, an arrogant faith in our ability to react in time to save our own skin.”

But in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, there’s no question that the public will start demanding government action to help communities adapt to future disasters. And as soon as we begin the debate over adaptation to global warming, we can put an end to the debate over whether global warming is real.

That the environmental community has chosen to sit on the sidelines is probably a good thing. It will make for much a better politics if developers, unions, doctors, and relief organizations take the lead in demanding investments in things like stronger levees as well as clean energy.

We have little doubt that our exhortations to imagine possibilities as large as the crisis in front of us strike many as fantasy, but in the words of Jung, “Without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of the imagination is incalculable.” **TAP**

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus are managing partners of American Enviroics (www.AmericanEnviroics.com) and directors of The Breakthrough Institute (www.theBreakthrough.org). The Death of Environmentalism and the Birth of a New American Politics will be published in fall 2006 by Houghton Mifflin.