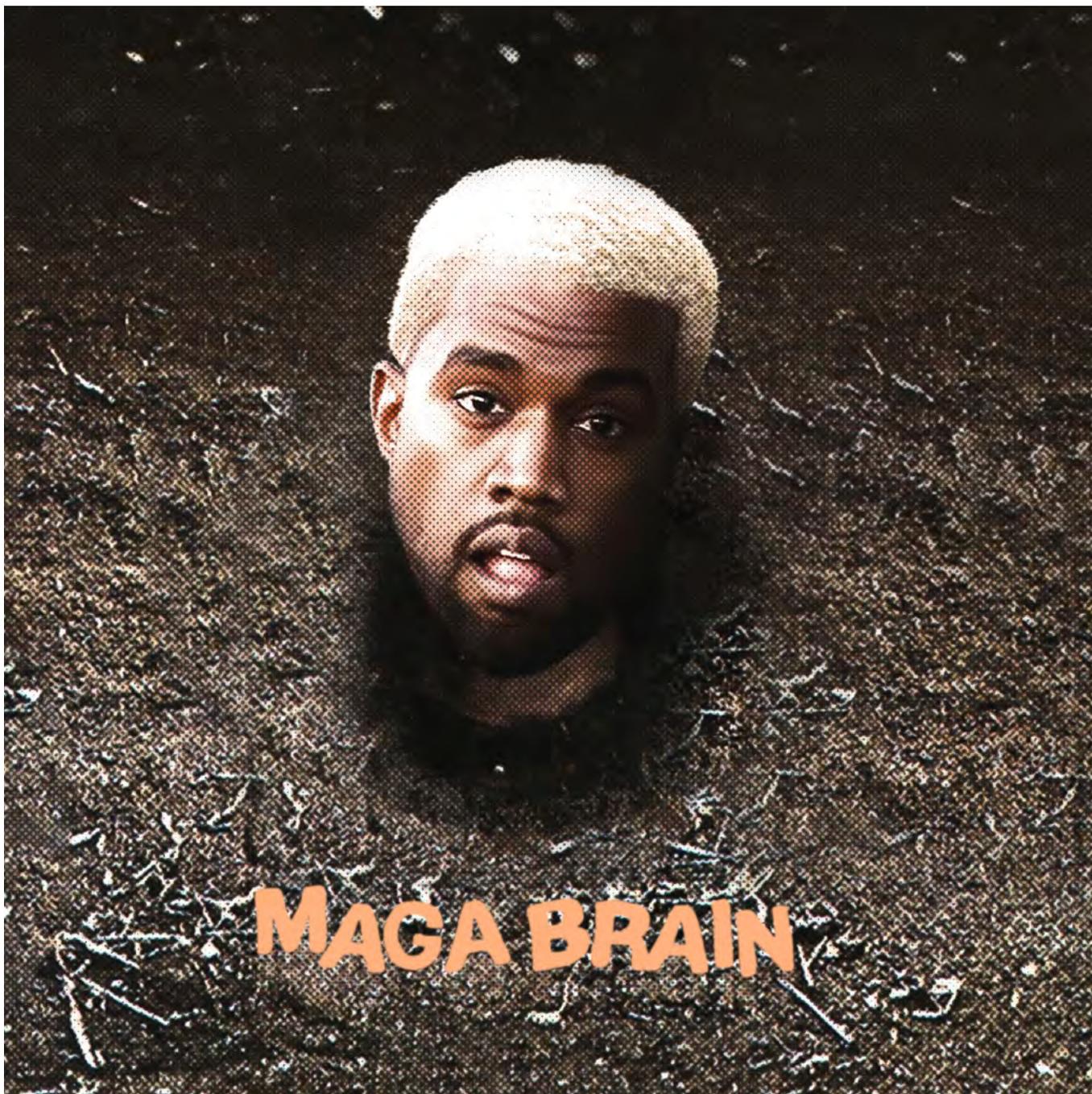


CounterPunch



THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE WEAPONS INDUSTRY BY JOAN ROELOFS
MARX'S ALTERNATIVE BY PAUL STREET
BURNING THE HEMISPHERE BY STAN COX
MEXICANS WANT CHANGE BY LAURA CARLSEN
FREE TRADE IS NOT FREE BY PETE DOLACK



An Interview with Donald Worster

How We Burned Through a Whole Hemisphere in Just 500 Years

BY STAN COX

Donald Worster, a pioneer of the field of environmental history, held the Hall Distinguished Professorship Chair in American History at the University of Kansas from 199 to 2012. He is currently a Professor of World History at Renmin University of China. His books have examined the politics and economics of water in the American West, the life of John Muir, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and a range of other subjects.

*In Worster's most recent book, *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance* (Oxford University Press, 2016), he shows how the great windfall of land, resources, and ecological bounty that greeted Europeans when they arrived in the New World five centuries ago dramatically altered the history not only of the Americas but of the entire Earth. He argues convincingly that to the Europeans, the Western Hemisphere was, in practical terms, a "Second Earth." (Of course, the hemisphere's inhabitants at the time of Columbus regarded it as their Only Earth, and they would lose it.)*

Worster argues that U.S.-style capitalism and industrialism were made possible by the Second Earth's natural abundance and that over the past two centuries, they have deeply depleted the hemisphere's landscapes and ecosystems. America, Worster writes, is going to have to shift from a culture of abundance to a culture of limits. He covers much other ground as well in the book, in rich detail. I recently asked him about some of that in a May 1 conversation via Internet; he was in Beijing at the time, and I was in Kansas.

STAN COX: You begin the story 500 years ago as Europe begins exploiting the abundance provided by the Second Earth. You cite the scholar William Prescott Webb, who argued, in your words, that Europe "was jolted out of deep historic ruts of poverty and inequality by the unexpected discovery of faraway resources" from the Americas. That's at odds with the well-worn story of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, isn't it?

DON WORSTER: Europe is jolted out of the rut, but that doesn't happen until 200 years after Columbus. The Industrial Revolution doesn't take place until even longer after Columbus. You could say that as late as 1800, materially, Western Europe

was not more advanced than East Asia. You could say, and there have been several ways of measuring this, that East Asia was ahead of Western Europe in many, many respects, even though it had fallen into a kind of stagnation itself.

Our image of Europe, from the Greeks on, has been the model for the world, on the cutting edge, and then comes the Renaissance, and it's all a very flattering view. But it doesn't look that way by a lot of the data. Look at Scotland, let's say. People were sitting around campfires, chewing on bones. The poverty of Europe in those days is something we forget. At the end of the Middle Ages, there were, of course, some prosperous cities such as Venice, but a lot of that was wealth was coming from Eurasia. That's why Columbus and the others and their leaders were so eager to go to East Asia, because they saw that as kind of a golden land, and they wanted to get in on the riches that they thought were there and to pull themselves out of stagnation and poverty.

Columbus was part of a much bigger effort of a backward Europe to get in touch with the fabled power and riches of the Orient. But—bingo!—without knowing what he was doing or where he was going, he finds an entire hemisphere.

SC: Today among economists, we see unanimous enthusiasm for permanent growth. In contrast, that revered prophet of capitalism himself, Adam Smith, noted in *The Wealth of Nations* that, in your words, "The best that one could hope for was not progress forever but progress for a while—progress that would end with a comfortable stationary state." But capitalism didn't quite work out that way, did it? Was it stimulated by the plenty that the Second Earth provided?

DW: Smith was writing in the 1770s. The wealth that would accumulate, the growth, hadn't happened yet. I think there was a tendency among the early political economists to feel that the world was still a place of limits. I don't know exactly when that changed, but my hunch is—and I wrote about this only very briefly in the book—I think the change happened when economics began to develop in the United States.

The American economists' visions of endless abundance were not contemplated by British economists. People like Henry Carey of Philadelphia in the mid-nineteenth century saw images of wealth that were infinite. And where did they get this? They were basically writing a whole new chapter in the history of economics. But it doesn't even begin to appear as the word 'growth' until the twentieth century when they begin to talk about infinite growth. I don't believe there is anything inherent in capitalism that says there must be a belief in infinite growth. However, I can't imagine capitalism without that belief. But today there are Nobel Prize-winning economists who are saying that we can have capitalism in a no-growth world.

SC: But do you think they are right about that? I seriously

doubt that capitalism could function without the capital accumulation that drives growth. That accumulation is the whole point of capitalism.

DW: I don't think American capitalism can do it. And I don't think the kind of capitalism that is resident now here in China can do it. But I think the Chinese, who have known the limits of their land and soil and water for a few thousand years (much better than Americans) can get back to that way of thinking more easily and readily. But right now, China's leaders are hoping that Southeast Asia and Africa can be their Promised Land. They're borrowing the rhetoric of imaginary abundance from the United States from its experience in living in the New World.

Most economists still aren't reading Adam Smith very carefully. They still think of him as talking only about endless improvements in productivity. As you know, most economists have only two factors in their thinking: number one, capital, and number two . . . sometimes . . . labor. Future changes in economics departments will be very interesting to watch, because I think that belief is already beginning to crack. And when they do change, they may rediscover people like John Stuart Mill and Ricardo, and of course, Adam Smith, have something to offer.

SC: Then fossil fuels came along in the nineteenth century at a time when abundance appeared to be hitting a ceiling. Coal and then oil are often seen as having lifted that ceiling, but you say that fossil fuels, while important to the story, were "late supplements" to the Age of Abundance. Later on, you argue that twentieth-century cheap oil was not a "Third Earth" in a class with the Second Earth. Why is that?

DW: I am reacting against an ill-founded historical interpretation: that the economic miracle of the last 200 years begins with industrialization and above all with fossil fuels, and before that, it was just poverty. I think that's far too narrow a way of thinking about that miracle. My book is arguing that we've got to start well before the late eighteenth century. You can't attribute everything to energy and energy alone. You have to talk about forests and soils and wildlife, and all of these things are essential to making an agricultural economy or even an industrial economy.

Now, sure the discovery and development of fossil fuels become absolutely pivotal. But this development of fossil fuels depended heavily on the availability of the New World. People had used coal for a long time. But what starts off this whole process of scientific investigation and innovation and capital accumulation comes out of the New World . . . Now they've got money, they've got knowledge, they've even got the plant they need: cotton. This is something about the Industrial Revolution that has been overlooked by so many people. They don't pay attention to the fact that cotton was absolutely essential to the Industrial Revolution—as important as coal. In

the early stages, it was all textiles; they're still central today. Without cotton, they wouldn't have even needed coal. There is a chain of consequences that just gets cut off, ignored.

Even if you say coal has been incredibly important to industry, you have to ask which part of the world ends up having so much of the coal reserves. Where does that development take place? In North America! The United States is the Saudi Arabia of coal. And even oil—although we don't have that much oil, the oil industry was invented by Americans using Saudi resources. The New World was loaded with energy possibilities. And we know that won't last. That's my main point, that no matter where abundance comes from, it doesn't last.

SC: You point out a weakness of the U.S. conservation movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: that with its focus on preservation of landscapes and watersheds threatened by activities like farming and logging, it did not recognize the great damage done by industry despite its much smaller geographic footprint. It seems to me that similar neglect is being committed by the so-called "ecomodernist" movement of the past few years, led in this country by the Breakthrough Institute. Its boosters would have humans retreat into super-high-tech, self-sufficient urban areas powered by nuclear energy, allowing much more of the Earth's surface to be turned back over to Mother Nature (and getting their food by magic from somewhere or other.) Have you been following this stuff?

DW: Yes, I have. It's this idea that technology can be our Third Earth, that it can just invent abundance. We have begun to swing around to that idea more and more as we are running out of natural abundance. There is a difference between natural abundance that we didn't create but is essential to life and technological abundance that comes out of our brains. But there is this belief that all we need is our brains. Now I don't want to cast doubt on the power of the human brain, but this is a misplaced confidence. So when we put all our eggs into that basket and say we just need more babies that will grow up with more brains, and everything will be OK, . . .

This just ignores the fact that humans have collapsed and failed in civilization after civilization. Brains can't always solve the problem, technology doesn't always arrive at the midnight hour. These people are offering us a utopian vision free of the realism of nature. Now I don't think the early conservationists like George Perkins Marsh could be accused of that. But there were people around who saw deforestation and so on, and thought that by shifting to an industrialized economy, we would solve our environmental problems. And when they did it . . . well, just look at a place like Pittsburgh or Chicago in the nineteenth century. It takes us a while to see the problems in our own dreams and schemes. But of course, we are still going to need innovation and technology.

Coal power plant in northern Indiana. Photo: IDEM

SC: But how can we sort good from bad technologies? The great environmentalists of the 1970s recognized, as you write, that “The miracle of technology was in fact making the earth a more dangerous place to live.” How can a society discriminate between necessary technologies and ones that are too fragile or destructive to be considered?

DW: I think that environmentalists have got to back off from being the voice of gloom and doom and to be more positive about change and particularly change that can be more integrated into preserving this planet. In that sense, maybe I’m sounding a little too much like the ecomodernizers. But they go far, far too far with this. They are bringing us back to a very narrow moral vision. We have to find technologies that allow us to preserve and nourish the soils and plants and animals of the Earth. That’s an optimistic vision . . . in a way. But it’s not as optimistic or as narrow as the Breakthrough Institute’s vision.

SC: David Potter and his book *People of Plenty*, published in the 1950s, are featured in your book. Potter argued that abundance was not a gift of nature but a product of capitalist competition and culture, that the factory had supplanted nature as the source of abundance. How did his critics over the years, including you, respond to this idea?

DW: David Potter still ranks as one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century. He was a superstar. So there were not too many people who took him on critically. And the spirit behind *People of Plenty* resonated with people in the academic world, the political world, the economic world. There was very little criticism at the time, and the book has been regarded as one of the great classics of the American spirit, character,

institutions, and so on.

With more and more historians of that era becoming critical of capitalism, Potter did not. He just took capitalism for granted. He didn’t even mention it in the book! But when you look at the book critically, you see he is talking about capitalism. But he saw only its extraordinary productivity and none of its failures. He was a kind of fundamentalist. I don’t think a lot of scholars today who read that book would be happy with his sort of genial view of things. They would instead see anticipations of Ronald Reagan, not to mention Mr. Trump. I think we are long overdue for a critique of *People of Plenty* and that’s why I put Potter in my book.

SC: In *Shrinking the Earth*, you end up in the present day, discussing the widely followed concept of multiple planetary boundaries, as studied by Johan Rockström and the Swedish Resilience Center. They include not only thresholds for greenhouse-gas concentrations but also ones for nitrogen-cycle disruption, freshwater use, land-use change, and other assaults on the Earth. You point out that recognizing such limits is not the same as calling for non-growth or degrowth. How does the planetary limits argument advance the discussion?

DW: First of all, when economists talk about growth, they almost always mean growth in GDP. Even the people like Kuznets who came up with GDP made no claim that it had any relationship to human well-being. I am agnostic on this, but I am open to the possibility that we can have a kind of growth that does not have an impact on those planetary boundaries. In setting the limits that Rockström and others propose,

it's pretty damn hard to get good numbers. Even climate, but almost every one of those other boundaries has its own kinds of problems. If we make them too precise, we may think we can go right up to that limit and stop and we'll be OK. We won't leave a margin of error.

So I don't think that talking about boundaries, instead of just saying we are going to slow down growth, is necessarily a better idea, but it does point out more clearly what we are trying to achieve. Just to achieve no growth without any evidence that it's going to help anybody or the planet doesn't seem to me to be a rational way to think about it. I remain open to the possibility that we can redefine growth in ways that don't involve increased material consumption: human advancement, spiritual growth, etc.

The question, though, becomes, how can the planet's vast numbers of poor people reach something approaching an American standard of living, at least with regard to necessities for a good quality of life, without the ecological basis of their lives being undermined? As I go around China, I think of the hundreds of millions of people who still live in very, very difficult economic circumstances—we know that simply having economic growth doesn't necessarily mean that their lives have improved. How do we address that without endangering the ecosphere? The Chinese government is just as bad as ours and all the others in making growth figures the measure of its success. China has made great advances, but the inequalities that have grown up are enormous in this country, some of the biggest in the world.

SC: Finally, I hope you are right when you write near the end of the book that our descendants may choose to rework democracy's purpose so that it means not freeing the individual of restraint but rather embracing restraint for all. Same for this sentence: "We may experience a radical undoing of those ideas and institutions that have come to define our life on earth." And I'd like to quote this paragraph from your epilogue, in which you say,

No people will be more shocked by a turn away from that modern way of thinking than those who have lived longest by it. Nations that have been used to living by the simplest of means right down to the present should not find it so hard to understand that abundance is not endless, whereas people in Western societies, especially the United States, which have been firmly devoted to the ideology of capitalism and so blessed in natural abundance, may find it nearly impossible to adjust.

So my final question is this: will the small "We", the affluent West, foreclose any chance that the big "We", humanity, might have had to achieve the necessary radical undoing and restraint for all?

DW: Well, of course that is a question of prophecy, not history! But anyway, I don't underestimate the capacity of the United

States and its culture to innovate and change. I think we have the capacity to make lots of changes, especially when it comes to technology, as with shifting energy sources. But we are going through a social conflict now that has its deepest roots not just in immigration and white nationalism but also in a sense of diminishing horizons. There's the feeling that we don't have the opportunities before us that we once had, and therefore we have to be less generous and be critical of some of our policies of the past. Some of that criticism is healthy, but much is radically unhealthy and leads to violence and social chaos.

I don't know where this fracturing of the United States as a society will lead. We have been through periods of conflict before, and I think there is that potential for us to come back together and for people to say, "OK, this is not the world of our grandparents, but we can still live side by side with people, we can still have a generous spirit toward other societies, and we can live in this world and create a better civilization." Nobody at the highest levels in the United States, of either major party, has been talking about this clearly enough.

The Chinese government is talking constantly about building an "ecological civilization"*. It's all rhetoric, no one knows what exactly it means, and it doesn't seem to interfere with anything they want to do. But it does make people think and talk about it, there are conferences being held, discussing questions like, What can we do to achieve it? The word "ecology" over here has kind of magical powers. If China keeps moving in this direction and taking it more and more seriously, it will be the leader of the world in the next few decades. It will provide moral, visionary leadership that the Americans will not provide.

I'm not ready to say the Americans are out of the game. We have a lot of assets on our side, including openness, critical discourse, a powerful understanding through the natural sciences of where we are, our history in conservation. So people will need to say, "This our future. We have to come to terms with all these things and build a new society different from the old, and we can do it."

*According to Worster, the term "ecological civilization" was originally articulated in 1978 by Iring Fetscher, a political scientist at Germany's Frankfurt School. It has often been employed by writers associated with the journal *Monthly Review*, including John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff. Foster's view of the ecological-civilization boom in China seems to be largely in accord with Worster's. **CP**

STAN COX (@CoxStan) is on the editorial board of *Green Social Thought*. He is author of *Any Way You Slice It: The Past, Present, and Future of Rationing* and co-author, with Paul Cox, and *How the World Breaks: Life in Catastrophe's Path, From the Caribbean to Siberia*.