

Veering off the path of mutually assured destruction

Our Planet Earth
STEPHEN HESSE

As individuals, we usually recognize when we're heading off in the wrong direction and then have the good sense to get ourselves back on the right track.

Unfortunately, though, pursuing what is eminently reasonable behavior for us as individuals becomes nearly impossible as participants in a 6.8-billion-member society. So, feeling unable to effect change on a global scale as individuals, most of us abdicate responsibility and hope someone else will take action — even as the status quo has our global economy in a tailspin and our biosphere in tatters.

Richard Evanoff, 54, is one of those not yet willing to abdicate. A professor at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Evanoff believes that it is still possible to get society on a sustainable path that balances ecological sustainability, social justice, and human well-being.

Evanoff, who teaches intercultural communication and environmental ethics at the university's School of International Politics, Economics and Communication, has just had a book published, titled "Bioregionalism and Global Ethics: A Transactional Approach to Achieving Ecological Sustainability, Social Justice, and Human Well-being" (Routledge; 2011).

Recently we met and spoke about his new book, the challenges facing our society and our planet — and his thoughts on what needs to be done to avoid ecological and economic collapse on a global scale.

Why did you write this book?

Within the next several decades it is likely that the world will face a convergence of environmental problems that could lead

to severe economic and social collapse if we do not begin to address them now.

Which problems are you referring to?

Among others, the fact that as oil production begins to decline there will be insufficient sources of alternative energy to sustain a consumer economy. We also face the inability to feed a growing global population as farmland dwindles and becomes increasingly degraded and as oceans are overfished. And there are the well-known problems associated with climate change.

How does this relate to global ethics?

The root cause of most of the environmental destruction we are facing is overconsumption on the part of the top 20 percent (by wealth) of the world's population, which consumes 80 percent of

The United Nations estimates that the global economy would need to grow to five to 10 times its present size for everyone to have the same consumer lifestyles currently prevalent in developed countries.

With the best technology imaginable, we don't have the environmental capacity to do that. It has been calculated it would take the resources of at least five planet Earths for everyone to live at the same level as most Americans do now.

So our current approach to development isn't viable?

Right. Moreover, despite 50 years of concentrated efforts to develop the so-called Third World, the gap between rich and poor has more than doubled during that same period.

Although globalization has resulted in better lives for some, it has also led to the

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the Earth's resources. Meanwhile, the bottom 20 percent, which consumes only 1.1 percent of the Earth's resources, remains mired in poverty and unable to satisfy their basic needs.

The book proposes a global ethic that promotes the well-being of all of the Earth's people in ways that are both socially just and environmentally sustainable.

Is this what the concept of sustainable development proposes?

Our current model of development is based on the idea that developing countries can eventually catch up with developed countries in terms of material affluence and that environmental problems can be dealt with primarily through technology.

Do you not believe this is possible?

destruction of local ecosystems and communities — a theme treated in the recent popular movie, "Avatar."

So would you say that development, as we know it, is harmful?

The term "maldevelopment" is used to describe development that does not help the poor, but in fact makes them poorer — even though others may benefit.

What are you suggesting as the alternative to this?

My book proposes a bioregional development paradigm that — instead of concentrating wealth and power in the hands of an elite global minority — seeks to foster local economies based on local production for local consumption, with more local, democratic control over both resources and political decision-making.

Can you briefly explain bioregionalism?

The term "bioregion" means "life region," and bioregionalism is the idea that human cultures can be brought into harmony with the natural regions they inhabit.

Your book refers to a "transactional approach." What does that mean?

Often we hear we must choose either to satisfy human needs or to protect the environment. A transactional approach to the human-nature relationship suggests that we can do both at the same time by recognizing that we cannot have good societies in the absence of good environments, and vice versa.

In concrete terms, how can we achieve a world order that is just and satisfies everyone's basic needs in sustainable ways?

To achieve this, the over-affluent would need to reduce their consumption by about 80 percent to enable everyone to have a fair share of the Earth's resources. Eliminating overconsumption among the rich and underconsumption among the poor would allow resources to be distributed to everyone in fair and sustainable ways.

Obviously this is not going to appeal to the uber-consumers who believe they are entitled to their wealthy lifestyles, even as the poor aspire to more affluence. That is exactly the dilemma we face. The closest thing we have right now to a global ethic is the idea that every country should pursue ever-higher levels of economic growth and consumerism. And that's exactly the ethic my book seeks to challenge.

So, what does the future look like?

The present system is simply unsustainable, it cannot continue, and the future will inevitably be one of lower resource consumption. The only question is whether this future comes about through a process of increased environmental degradation, global conflict, social disintegration and economic collapse, or through a process of intentionally giving up consumerism and attempting to provide for the human needs of all in a more equitable and ecologically sustainable way.

What would a genuinely sustainable economy look like?

It would be, following renowned U.S. ecological economist Herman E. Daly, a steady-state economy in which nonrenewable resources are not consumed faster than substitutes can be found; renewable resources are not consumed faster than they can be naturally replenished; and pollution is not generated faster than the Earth can naturally absorb it.

What kind of lifestyle would such an economy demand?

Well, we wouldn't be able to have all the gadgets and toys of our current consumer society, but we would be able to meet our basic needs for food, housing, education and healthcare. We would also have considerably more leisure time to pursue our own interests, develop meaningful relationships with others, and create a more vibrant, participatory culture overall.

Why is that?

If we could make basic goods that last just twice as long as they do now, we would be able to cut resource consumption and pollution by 50 percent and put in only half the working hours we do now to produce them. If technology is really the answer, we ought to be able to make products that last even longer. The Harvard sociologist, Juliet Schor, estimates that we could work about 20 hours a week with no decline in our basic standard of living.



Hanging in: Richard Evanoff, a Tokyo academic and author, still sees hope that society can return to a sustainable path.

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What is preventing us from achieving this sustainable and just society?

Today's economy stands in the way: an economy based on the idea that we should be producing more and more junk that is intended to become obsolete so that companies can increase their profits and GNP (gross national product) will continue to rise — while the environment is destroyed, resources are depleted, the climate changes unpredictably, and the basic needs of far too many humans remain unsatisfied.

Stephen Hesse teaches in the Chuo University Law Faculty and is director of the Chuo International Center. He can be contacted at: stephenhesse@hotmail.com In the interests of full disclosure, Richard and I have known each other for many years. We have worked together as educators and environmentalists, and we go bowling together from time to time. I would also like to say that I am the better bowler, but that is not the case.