



The Real Environment Crisis: Why Poverty, Not Affluence, Is the Environment's Number One Enemy [Full Text]

Jack M. Hollander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

Dale Jamieson

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The Real Environment Crisis: Why Poverty, Not Affluence, Is the Environment's Number One Enemy

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Poverty is the cause of the real environmental crisis, according to Jack Hollander. Affluence is the environment's friend, not its enemy. Rather than squandering our resources on such questionable endeavors as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we should lift up poor people in the developing world. This is an important message that many Americans need to hear. It is stunningly illustrated by the cover photograph of a shantytown built on a dump in the Philippines.

Also appealing, especially to those weary of environmentalist jeremiads, is the author's almost Reaganesque tone of sunny optimism. Global poverty can be fixed, he tells us: it is largely due to the corruption and perfidy of the leaders of developing countries. In some of these countries there is "little tradition of assisting the poor" (p. 196); the rich nations of the world, however, are prepared to show the way to affluence and freedom. This project has not yet succeeded because "only in the decade since the end of the Cold War has the global assault on poverty reached significant dimensions." He grants that some development assistance was provided prior to this, but now "the causes and remedies of poverty are being addressed much more broadly by the global community" (p. 194). Though he is economical with details, it is clear that in the author's view globalization and the application of science and technology are at the forefront of the response to poverty. The book's tone is well captured by his discussion of the collapsing salmon populations in the Pacific Northwest:

One thing is certain . . . The magnificent salmon . . . are considered a precious national asset, and most people do not want them to become extinct. If it is decided, with hard scientific evidence, that human actions have harmed the salmon and that human actions can save them, this affluent nation has the means to save them, and it will do so. In contrast, if this drama were playing out in a country where poverty rules, the salmon would already be doomed.
(p. 65)

The author explicitly rejects the idea that rich countries export their pollution to poor countries, and finds "especially jarring . . . the implication . . . that *you and I are the enemy* . . ." (p. 3; emphasis added). While those who drive SUVs and live high-consumptive lifestyles escape censure, environmentalists, the "hysterical" media, and anti-globalization activists come in for a scolding. The Indian activist and intellectual Vandana Shiva is singled out by name for her defense of "the traditional trappings of extreme poverty." Since biotechnology, hydrogen-powered cars, and the green revolution are central actors in the author's narrative of progress, it is easy to see why he thinks that Shiva's "glorification of traditional culture is no gift to the poor" (p. 193).

The author's view can be characterized as Cold War liberalism applied to the environment. Well-meaning Northerners want to bestow the gift of science and technology to the huddled masses of the South, freeing them from centuries of poverty and misery; they would succeed if only corrupt, undemocratic

governments and benighted intellectuals would get out of the way. This vision is in stark contrast to that of those theorists who see underdevelopment as a product of Northern dominance rather than as a preexisting problem that the North would solve if given a chance. Some would say that the author's view has been empirically refuted by history.

The author's lack of sensitivity to the complex relations between science and social interests makes him a sometimes unreliable guide to the problems he discusses. For example, rather than assessing climate science according to the canons of reliability that would normally be invoked, he buys into the "contrarian" view, associated with the political right, that sees the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as some strangely politicized body trying to impose its agenda on the world's governments. This list to the right is also expressed in the author's willingness to take the deliverances of energy markets at face value and his silence about how these markets are rigged in favor of powerful interests, especially those invested in the fossil fuel industry. All of this is to say that the book is politically naive, which is not surprising since its author is a distinguished physicist and administrator, not a social scientist.

What about Hollander's main thesis that the real environmental crisis is caused by poverty down there rather than affluence up here? My own view is that the relations between some people's affluence, other people's poverty, and global environmental destruction are too various and complex for any simplistic statement about their relations to be true. Overconsumption, corruption, and oppression are woven together in a way that binds the peoples of the world in a cycle of poverty and environmental destruction.

Consider one horrifying example now playing itself out in Central Africa. Chimpanzee populations are being decimated for the bushmeat trade. The demand for tropical hardwoods in the rich countries of the North has led to an increasing penetration of the forests of Central Africa by European logging firms, often with the support of international institutions such as the World Bank. Numerous roads have been built, fragmenting the forest and opening up remote areas to hunting. Large numbers of workers have been hired who eat more meat than Africans living traditional lifestyles, have money to purchase weapons, and ready access to the forest with their animal populations and to trucks for transporting meat. While much of this hunting is illegal, local governments are too corrupt or powerless to enforce the law. Thus, the mass killing of our nearest relatives accelerates, the consequence of systemic factors in which responsibility is both widespread and diffuse.

Is affluence the solution to such problems? As the Brundtland Commission argued in 1987, global affluence of the right kind would go a long way toward ameliorating our environmental problems, and Hollander is to be credited for reminding us of this. However there are different kinds of affluence and different kinds of environmental problems, and the relations between them are complex. A full analysis would examine the human heart and institutions, as well as the pocketbook. It is no shame to have failed to complete this formidable task, but in the face of such difficult problems, some humility is in order.

-- Dale Jamieson, New York University

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