



American passage: Towards a new economy and a new politics

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ABSTRACT

America's present system of political economy is failing across a broad front – economic, social, political, and environmental.

The prioritization of economic growth and economic values is at the root of the systemic failures and resulting crises that America is now experiencing. But an expanding body of evidence is now telling us to think again. Before it is too late, America should begin to move to a post-growth society where working life, the natural environment, our communities, and the public sector are no longer sacrificed for the sake of mere GDP growth, and where the illusory promises of continuous growth no longer provide an excuse for neglecting to deal generously with compelling social needs.

Of particular importance for the new economy are government policies that will temper growth while simultaneously improving social and environmental well-being, policies such as shorter work weeks and longer vacations, with more time for children and families, greater labor protections, job security, and benefits, including generous parental leaves, guarantees to part-time workers, restrictions on advertising, a new design for the twenty-first century corporation, incentives for local production and consumption, rigorous environmental, health, and consumer protection, greater economic and social equality, heavy spending on public services and initiatives to address population growth at home and abroad.

The best hope for a new political dynamic is a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, and political democracy into one progressive force. A unified agenda would embrace a profound commitment to social justice and environmental protection, a sustained challenge to consumerism and commercialism and the lifestyles they offer, a healthy skepticism of growth-mania and a new look at what society should be striving to grow, a challenge to corporate dominance and a redefinition of the corporation and its goals, and a commitment to an array of major pro-democracy reforms.

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If America's present system of political economy were performing well, there would be little need to question it or seek fundamental change. However, that is not the case. Asked what the key goals of economic life should be, many would reply, "to enhance social well-being while sustaining democratic prospects and environmental quality." Judged by this standard, today's political economy is failing. It is a failure that reaches many spheres of national life—economic, social, political, and environmental. Indeed, America can be said to be in crisis in each of these four areas.¹

The *economic* crisis of the Great Recession brought on by Wall Street financial excesses has stripped tens of millions of middle class Americans of their jobs, homes, and retirement assets and plunged many into poverty and despair.

A *social* crisis of extreme and growing inequality has been unraveling America's social fabric for several decades. A tiny minority have experienced soaring incomes and accumulated grand fortunes while wages for working people have stagnated despite rising productivity gains and poverty has risen to a near thirty-year high. Social mobility has declined, record numbers of people lack health insurance, schools are failing, prison populations are swelling, employment security is a thing of the past, and American workers put in more hours than workers in other high income countries.²

An *environmental* crisis, driven by excessive human consumption and waste and a spate of terrible technologies, is disrupting Earth's climate, reducing Earth's capacity to support life, and creating large scale human displacement that further fuels social breakdown.

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¹ This article is adapted from James Gustave Speth, Solutions, September–October 2010, p. 33. For a more detailed treatment of the themes developed here, see generally *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009). See also the framing of these issues by the New Economy Working Group, www.neweconomyworkinggroup.org.

² See Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), which reports that, among a cross-section of advanced countries, the United States has both the highest income inequality and the most severe health and social problems.

And a *political* crisis reflected in governmental paralysis and a democracy that is weak, shallow and corrupted—the best democracy that money can buy.³

The case for fundamental change is underscored especially by the urgency of environmental conditions.⁴ Here is one measure of that problem: all that human societies have to do to destroy the planet's climate and biota and leave a ruined world to future generations is to keep doing exactly what is being done today, with no growth in the human population or the world economy. Just continue to release greenhouse gases at current rates, just continue to impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century won't be fit to live in. But, of course, human activities are not holding at current levels—they are accelerating, dramatically. It took all of history to build the \$7 trillion world economy of 1950; recently, economic activity has grown by that amount every decade. At typical rates of growth, the world economy will now double in size in less than twenty years. We are thus facing the possibility of an enormous increase in environmental deterioration, just when we need to move strongly in the opposite direction.

Accelerating environmental deterioration is most starkly revealed in the global trends—trends in which the U.S. economy and U.S. politics are deeply complicit. About half of the world's wetlands and a third of the mangroves are gone. An estimated ninety percent of the large predator fish are gone, and 75 percent of marine fisheries are now overfished or fished to capacity. Twenty percent of the corals are gone, and another twenty percent severely threatened. Half of the world's temperate and tropical forests are gone. The rate of deforestation in the tropics continues at about an acre a second. Species are disappearing at rates about 1000 times faster than normal. The planet has not seen such a spasm of extinction in 65 million years, since the dinosaurs disappeared. Over half of the agricultural land in drier regions suffers from some degree of deterioration and desertification. Persistent toxic chemicals can now be found by the dozens in essentially each and every one of us.

Human impacts are now large relative to natural systems. The earth's stratospheric ozone layer was severely depleted before the change was discovered. Most importantly, human activities have pushed atmospheric carbon dioxide up by more than a third and increased other greenhouse gases as well, with the result that we have started in earnest the dangerous processes of disrupting climate and acidifying the oceans. Everywhere, earth's ice fields are melting. Industrial processes are fixing nitrogen, making it biologically active, at a rate equal to nature's; one consequence is the development of hundreds of dead zones in the oceans due to overfertilization. Human actions already consume or destroy each year about 40 percent of nature's photosynthetic output, leaving too little for other species. Freshwater withdrawals doubled globally between 1960 and 2000 and are now over half of accessible runoff. The following rivers no longer reach the oceans in the dry season: the Colorado, Yellow, Ganges, and Nile, among others.

To seek something new and better, a good place to begin is to ask why today's system of political economy is failing so broadly. Environmentally, the answer is that key features of the system work together to produce a reality that is highly destructive. An unquestioning society-wide commitment to economic growth at almost any cost; powerful corporate interests whose overriding objective is to grow by generating profit, including profit from avoiding the environmental costs they create and from replicating technologies designed with little

³ Many long time observers of national politics in the United States have described Washington today in very pessimistic terms. See, e.g., William Greider, *The Soul of Capitalism* (Simon and Schuster, 2003); Peter Barnes, *Capitalism 3.0* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006); and Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Inc.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also Robert Kaiser, *So Damn Much Money* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

⁴ For a fuller and annotated depiction of environmental conditions and trends in the United States and globally, including those cited in the text, see Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, pp. 1–2, 17–42, 71–78.

regard for the environment; markets that systematically fail to recognize environmental costs unless corrected by the government; government that is subservient to corporate interests and the growth imperative; rampant consumerism spurred by an addiction to novelty and by sophisticated advertising; economic activity now so large in scale that its impacts alter the fundamental biophysical operations of the planet—all combine to deliver an ever-growing world economy that is undermining the ability of the planet to sustain life.⁵

This environmental reality is linked powerfully with the growing social inequality and the erosion of democratic governance and popular control. Only a powerful democratic reality can guide and regulate the economy for environmental and social ends, and only a society that is cohesive and fair is likely to rise fully to shared challenges like the environment. Unfortunately, Americans today live and work in a system of political economy that cares profoundly about profits and growth and that cares about society and the natural world mainly to the extent it is required to do so. It is thus up to us as citizens to inject values of fairness, solidarity, and sustainability into this system, and the government is the primary vehicle we have for accomplishing this. But typically we fail at this assignment because our politics are too enfeebled and the government is excessively under the thumb of powerful corporations and concentrations of great wealth. Consider the similarity between the recent financial collapse and the ongoing environmental deterioration. Both are the result of a system in which those with economic power are propelled, and not restrained by government, to take dangerous risks for the sake of great profit.

The prioritization of economic growth and economic values is at the root of the systemic failures and resulting crises America is now experiencing. Today, the reigning policy orientation holds that the path to greater well-being is to grow and expand the economy. Productivity, wages, profits, the stock market, employment, and consumption must all go up. This growth imperative trumps all else. It can undermine families, jobs, communities, the environment, a sense of place and continuity because it is confidently asserted and widely believed that growth is worth the price that must be paid for it. Growth is measured by tallying GDP at the national level and sales and profits at the company level, and pursuit of GDP and profit can be said to be the overwhelming priorities of national economic and political life.

But an expanding body of evidence is now telling us to think again.⁶ Economic growth may be the world's secular religion, but for much of the world, it is a god that is failing—underperforming for most of the world's people and, for those in affluent societies, now creating more problems than it is solving. The never-ending drive to

⁵ See Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, pp. 7–11, 46–66, and the works cited there. Many of these issues have been raised for decades; what is new is the increased urgency of the problems, the inevitable consequences of decades of inaction. See, e.g., Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Knopf, 1971); Herman E. Daly, *Toward a Steady-State Economy* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1973) and *Steady State Economics* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1977); Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits To Growth* (New York: New American Library, 1972); Paul R. Ehrlich et al., *Human Ecology* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1973); and William Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1977). See also Philip Shabecoff, "U.S. Study Warns of Extensive Problems from Carbon Dioxide Pollution," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1981, p. A13 (study recommending that carbon dioxide concentrations should not be allowed to go higher than 50 percent above preindustrial level).

⁶ See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth* (London: Earthscan, 2009); Peter Victor, *Managing Without Growth* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2008); Stephen Spratt et al., *The Great Transition* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2009); Peter Brown and Geoffrey Garver, *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009); Herman E. Daly, *Beyond Growth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) (to whom we are all indebted); Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); David Korten, *Agenda for a New Economy* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009); and Andrew Simms et al., *Growth Isn't Possible: Why We Need a New Economic Direction* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2010). See also Costanza, R. 2008. Stewardship for a "full" world. *Current History* 107:30–35, and Beddoe, R. et al. 2009. Overcoming Systemic Roadblocks to Sustainability: the evolutionary redesign of world views, institutions, and technologies. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106:2483–2489. See also John DeGraaf and Dave Batker, "What's the Economy for, Anyway?" at www.bullfrogfilms.com.

grow the overall U.S. economy undermines communities and the environment; it fuels a ruthless international search for energy and other resources, it fails at generating the needed jobs, and it rests on a manufactured consumerism that is not meeting the deepest human needs. Americans are substituting growth and consumption for dealing with the real issues—for doing things that would truly make the country better off. Psychologists have pointed out, for example, that while economic output per person in the United States has risen sharply in recent decades, there has been no increase in life satisfaction and levels of distrust and depression have increased substantially.⁷

Writing in *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, psychologist David Myers sees this pattern of soaring wealth and shrinking spirit as “the American paradox.” He observes that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Americans found themselves “with big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale, secured rights and diminished civility. We were excelling at making a living but too often failing at making a life. We celebrated our prosperity but yearned for purpose. We cherished our freedoms but longed for connection. In an age of plenty, we were feeling spiritual hunger. These facts of life lead us to a startling conclusion: Our becoming better off materially has not made us better off psychologically.”⁸

Before it is too late, America should begin to move to post-growth society where working life, the natural environment, our communities, and the public sector are no longer sacrificed for the sake of mere GDP growth; where the illusory promises of ever-more growth no longer provide an excuse for neglecting to deal generously with compelling social needs; and where citizen democracy is no longer held hostage to the growth imperative.

For the most part, advocates for change have worked within the current system of political economy, but working within the system will, in the end, not succeed when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself. The case for immediate action on issues like health care and climate change is compelling, but the social and environmental challenges just reviewed will not, in the end, yield to problem-solving incrementalism. Environmentalists and other progressives have gone down the path of incremental reform for decades, and the results of that experiment are in. The roots of our environmental and social problems are deeply systemic and thus require transformational change—the shift to a new, sustaining economy ushered on by a new politics, both discussed in the sections that follow. George Bernard Shaw famously said that all progress depends on not being reasonable. It’s time for a large amount of civic unreasonableness.

What circumstances might make transformational change and the birth of a sustaining economy possible? A decline in legitimacy as the system fails to deliver social and environmental well-being, together with a mounting sense of crisis and loss, both occurring at a time of wise leadership, and accompanied by the articulation of a new American narrative or story and by the appearance across the landscape of new and appropriate models—were all these to come together, real change would be possible. Most of all, what is needed is a new politics and a new social movement, powerful and inclusive. The best hope for such a new political dynamic is a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, and political democracy into one progressive force. All are communities of shared fate because they face the same reality: a political economy that does not prioritize sustaining human and natural communities.

1. Policies for a new economy

Americans are told routinely that the priority must be a strong economy. Yet, many now appreciate that of equal or higher importance are a strong society, strong nature, and a strong democracy. Today’s economy offers little help in these regards. We must move beyond it. We need to reinvent the economy, not merely restore it.

A great imperative Americans now face is to build a new economy—a sustaining economy. Sustaining people, communities, and nature must henceforth be seen as the core goals of economic activity, not hoped for by-products of market success, growth for its own sake, and modest regulation. The watchword of the sustaining economy is caring: caring for each other, for the natural world, and for the future.⁹

America’s open-ended commitment to aggregate economic growth is consuming environmental and social capital, both now severely diminished. That said, it is also clear that, even in a post-growth America, many things do indeed need to grow: growth in good jobs and in the incomes of the poor; growth in availability of health care and the efficiency of its delivery; growth in education, research, and training; growth in security against the risks of illness, job displacement, old age, and disability; growth in investment in public infrastructure and in environmental protection and amenity; growth in the deployment of climate-friendly and other green technologies; growth in the restoration of both ecosystems and local communities; growth in non-military government spending at the expense of military; and growth in international assistance for sustainable, people-centered development for the half of humanity that live in poverty, to mention some prominent needs.

Jobs and meaningful work top this list because they are so important and unemployment is so devastating. Likely, future rates of economic growth, even with further federal stimulus, are only mildly associated with declining unemployment. The availability of jobs, the well-being of people, and the health of communities should not be forced to await the day when overall economic growth might deliver them. It is time to shed the view that government mainly provides safety nets and occasional Keynesian stimuli. Government instead should have an affirmative responsibility to ensure that those seeking decent jobs find them. And the surest, and also the most cost-effective, way to that end is direct government spending, investments, and incentives targeted at creating jobs in areas where there is high social benefit. Creating new jobs in areas of democratically determined priority is certainly better than trying to create jobs by pump priming aggregate economic growth, especially in an era where the macho thing to do in much of business is to shed jobs, not create them.

Of particular importance for the new economy are government policies that will temper growth while simultaneously improving social and environmental well-being, policies such as shorter work-weeks and longer vacations, with more time for children and families; greater labor protections, job security, and benefits, including generous parental leaves; guarantees to part-time workers; restrictions on advertising; a new design for the twenty-first-century corporation, one that embraces rechartering, new ownership patterns, and stakeholder primacy rather than shareholder primacy; a new system of financial regulations and institutions; incentives for local production and consumption; strong social and environmental provisions in trade agreements; rigorous environmental, health, and consumer protection, including full incorporation of environmental and social costs in prices; greater economic and social equality, with

⁷ See Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, pp. 126–164 and the works cited there. See also Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed* (New York: Norton, 2007), and The Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures, From Consumerism to Sustainability* (New York: Norton, 2010).

⁸ David G. Myers, “What Is the Good Life?” *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, Summer 2004, p. 15. See also David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁹ The New Economy Network’s mission is to provide a broad welcoming space for all those working for systemic change towards an economy where the purpose is to sustain people and the planet, where social justice and cohesion are prized, and where human communities, nature, and democracy all flourish. See www.neweconomynetwork.net. For a promising effort to pioneer the new economic understandings needed, see www.neweconomicinstitute.org. See also Riane Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007).

genuinely progressive taxation of the rich and greater income support for the poor; heavy spending on public services; and initiatives to address population growth at home and abroad. Taken together, these policies would undoubtedly slow GDP growth, but well-being and quality of life would improve.

If the market is going to work for the betterment of society, environmental and social costs should be incorporated into prices, and wrongheaded government subsidies, a vast empire today, should be eliminated. Honest prices will ensure that people take into account the environmental and social impacts of their purchases, whether they are environmentally conscious or just minding their pocket-books. High prices are a problem not so much because they are high but because people don't have the money to pay them and alternatives (e.g., truly fuel-efficient vehicles) are not readily available. Honest prices would be higher prices for many things, but that does not mean Exxon should pocket the difference or that equity issues should remain unaddressed.

Responsibly high energy prices, driven for example by a declining cap on carbon dioxide emissions, will help protect the earth's climate, increase demand for efficient vehicles and public transportation, spur new renewable energy industries, decrease the supply vulnerabilities and international entanglements of imported oil, strengthen local communities, and encourage localization rather than globalization. But honest energy prices must be accompanied by measures that make them affordable by those on whom they would otherwise impose a serious hardship. Challenging America's growth fetish and consumerism will not go far when so many barely get by and are desperate for jobs and greater income security.¹⁰ Clearly, addressing social and environmental needs must go hand in hand.

Conventional wisdom on the clash of economy and environment is that we can have it both ways, thanks to new technology and innovation. We do indeed need a revolution in the technologies of energy, transportation, construction, agriculture, and more. This ecological modernization can be driven by quantitative restrictions that ensure extractions from the environment do not exceed regenerative capacities and discharges to the environment do not exceed assimilative capacities. But the rate of technological change required to deal with environmental challenges in the face of rapid economic growth is extremely high and rarely achieved. If pollution from an industrial facility is cut in half but growth spawns another similar plant, there is no net gain. Housing, appliances, and transportation can become more energy-efficient, but the improvements will be overwhelmed if there are more cars, larger houses, and new appliances—and there are. There's a limit to how fast and far new technology can take us; technological change alone is not enough.

Americans are struggling today with the combined impacts of lost financial assets, underwater mortgages, and layoffs. These problems are associated with a slowdown in GDP growth, but the failure of growth is not truly their cause, and they will not necessarily be cured by more growth. We have had jobless growth before. As is now appreciated, the current Great Recession and its consequences are the result of government failing to intervene appropriately in the marketplace—in financial markets, in housing markets, in labor markets, and elsewhere. We are today on the receiving end of misguided policies, including massive deregulation, that have led to deep structural maladies. One lesson is clear: today's markets do not function well without strong and effective government intervention.

The economic crisis should also teach us to live more simply and focus more locally. It is time to move beyond consumerism and hyperventilating lifestyles. There has been too little focus on consumption and the mounting environmental and social costs of American "affluenza," extravagance, and wastefulness. Being less focused on getting and spending (initially, in part, because there is

¹⁰ See, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).

less to spend) can help society rediscover that the truly important things in life are not at the mall nor, indeed, for sale anywhere.

Psychological studies show that materialism is toxic to happiness and that more income and more possessions do not lead to a lasting sense of well-being or satisfaction with life. What makes people happy are warm personal relationships and giving rather than getting, things that are possible at a human scale.¹¹ The good news is that more and more people sense that there's a great misdirection of life's energy. In a survey, 83 percent of Americans say that society is not focused on the right priorities, 81 percent say that America is too focused on shopping and spending, 88 percent say that American society is too materialistic, 84 percent want to spend more time with family and friends.¹² These numbers, even if half right, suggest that a powerful base exists on which to build. Indeed, new signposts are emerging: Confront consumption. Practice sufficiency. Create social environments where overconsumption is viewed as silly, wasteful, ostentatious. Establish commercial-free zones. Buy local. Revitalize local economies. Eat slow food. Downshift. Public policy should support these directions, and it should also devise new measures to track improvements in social welfare, a purpose for which GDP is a miserable failure.¹³

Beyond policy change, another hopeful path into a sustainable and just future is to seed the landscape with innovative models. One of the most remarkable and yet under-noticed things going on in the United States today is the proliferation of innovative models of "local living" economies, sustainable communities, and transition towns, and for-benefit businesses which prioritize community and environment over profit and growth. The community-owned Evergreen Cooperative in Cleveland is a wonderful case in point. An impressive array of new economy businesses has been brought together in the American Sustainable Business Council and the B-Corporation program, and a new Fourth Sector is emerging, bringing together the best of the private sector, the not-for-profit NGOs, and government.¹⁴

2. A new politics

The transformation of today's economy requires far-reaching and effective government action. How else can the market be made to work for the environment rather than against it? How else can corporate behavior be altered or programs built that meet real human and social needs? Government is the principal means available to citizens to collectively exercise their stewardship responsibility to leave the world a better place. Inevitably, then, the drive for transformative change leads to the political arena, where a vital, muscular democracy steered by an informed and engaged citizenry is needed.

Yet, for Americans, merely to state the matter this way suggests the enormity of the challenge. The ascendancy of market fundamentalism and anti-regulation, anti-government ideology, have been particularly frightening, but even the passing of these extreme ideas would leave deeper, more long-term deficiencies. It is unimaginable

¹¹ See Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner, eds., *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004); Ed Diener and Martin E.P. Seligman, "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 5, no. 1 (2004); Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005); and Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, pp. 126–146 and the works cited there.

¹² Center for a New American Dream, "New American Dream: A Public Opinion Poll," 2004, available online at <http://www.newdream.org/about/PollResults.pdf>.

¹³ See Robert Costanza et al., *Beyond GDP: The Need for New Measures of Progress* (Boston: Pardee Center, Boston University, 2009).

¹⁴ See, e.g., www.asbcouncil.org; www.bcorporation.net; www.fourthsector.net; www.evergreencoop.com; www.smallisbeautiful.org; www.bouldercountygoinglocal.com; <http://transitions.org>; and, generally, <http://transitiontowns.org/Transition-Network/TransitionCommunities>. Also, see generally Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

that today's American politics will deliver the transformative changes needed.

There are many reasons why government in Washington today is too often more problem than solution. It is hooked on GDP growth—for its revenues, for its debts, for its political constituencies, and for its influence abroad. Government has been captured by the very corporations and concentration of wealth it should be seeking to regulate and revamp. And it is hobbled by an array of dysfunctional institutional arrangements beginning with the way presidents are elected.

Building the strength needed for change requires, first of all, a unified agenda among progressives. As mentioned, the best hope for a new political dynamic is a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, and political democracy into one progressive force. A unified agenda would embrace a profound commitment to social justice and environmental protection, a sustained challenge to consumerism and commercialism and the lifestyles they offer, a healthy skepticism of growth mania and a redefinition of what society should be striving to grow, a challenge to corporate dominance and a redefinition of the corporation and its goals, and a commitment to an array of major pro-democracy reforms.

The new agenda should also incorporate advocacy of human rights as a central concern. For example, although environmental justice has gained a foothold in American environmentalism, it is not yet the priority it should be. Many established environmental issues should be seen as human rights issues—the right to water and sanitation, the right to sustainable development, the right to cultural survival, freedom from climatic disruption and ruin, freedom to live in a non-toxic environment, the rights of future generations.

The new politics must turn major attention to the urgent need for political reforms—in campaign finance, elections, the regulation of lobbying, and much more. In their book *Off Center*, political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have developed an important and innovative agenda for political reform, including the revitalization of large-scale membership organizations that give citizens more leverage in the political process, measures that can increase voter turnout, open primaries, nonpartisan redistricting, a minimum free TV and radio time for all federal candidates meeting basic requirements, reducing the perks of incumbency, bringing back the Fairness Doctrine requiring equal air time for competing political views, and more.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Common Cause, Americans for Campaign Reform, and others have developed a powerful case for clean and fair elections through public financing, a case now even stronger due to the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.¹⁶

Successful political reform will also depend on addressing issues of social justice. In his book *On Political Equality*, America's senior political scientist Robert Dahl concludes that it is “highly plausible” that “powerful international and domestic forces [could] push us toward an irreversible level of political inequality that so greatly impairs our present democratic institutions as to render the ideals of democracy and political equality virtually irrelevant.”¹⁷ The authors brought together by political analysts Lawrence Jacobs and Theda Skocpol in *Inequality and American Democracy* document the emergence of a vicious cycle: income disparities shift political access and influence to wealthy constituencies and businesses, which further

imperils the potential of the democratic process to act to correct the growing income disparities.¹⁸

If the first watchword of the new politics is “broaden the agenda,” the second is “get political.” Lawyering and lobbying are important, but what the new politics must build now is a mighty force in electoral politics. Building the necessary muscle will require major efforts at grassroots organizing; strengthening groups working at the state and community level; and developing messages, appeals, and stories that inspire and motivate because they speak in a language people can understand, resonating with what is best in both the American tradition and the public's values and presenting compelling visions of a future worth having for families and children.

Our environmental discourse has been dominated thus far by lawyers, scientists, and economists. It has been too wonkish, out of touch with Main Street. Now, we need to hear a lot more from the poets, preachers, philosophers, and psychologists. And indeed we are. The world's religions are coming alive to their environmental roles—entering their ecological phase, in the words of religious leader Mary Evelyn Tucker. And just last year, the American Psychological Association devoted its annual gathering to environmental issues. The Earth Charter text and movement are providing a powerful base for a revitalization of the ethical and spiritual grounds of environmental efforts.

The final watchword of the new politics is “build the movement.” Efforts to build strength in America's electoral process and to bring together a wider array of constituencies embracing a broader agenda should both contribute to the emergence of a powerful citizens' movement for change. The new politics must be broadly inclusive, reaching out to embrace union members and working families, minorities and people of color, religious organizations, environmentalists, the women's movement, and other communities of complementary interest and shared fate. It is unfortunate but true that stronger alliance are still needed to overcome the “silo effect” that separates progressive communities, including those working on environment, domestic political reforms, the liberal social agenda, human rights, international peace, consumer issues, world health and population concerns, and world poverty and underdevelopment.

3. An agenda for analysis and action

Building a new economy and a new politics must be an ecumenical endeavor open to many progressive perspectives and ideas. Progress requires concerted efforts from many communities in at least three areas: challenging the current order of things, envisioning a new order and identifying the initiatives needed to realize it, and building capacity to promote change.

3.1. Challenging the current order

A great many Americans remain enthralled by a reigning mythology now deeply embedded in the national consciousness. GDP growth is an unalloyed good. Government regulation and other interference in the economy must meet the test of economic benefit. America is a land of economic opportunity and consumer sovereignty. The poor are poor because they deserve to be. We are well on our way to solving our environmental problems. It is acceptable to deny the validity of the best science if that science challenges religious views or political preferences. America is the most democratic nation on earth, and also the most generous, with the best health care. The reality, of course, is far from these propositions. It is important that this mythology be dethroned and that accurate information about actual conditions and trends be brought to an ever wider audience. Real life

¹⁵ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 185–223.

¹⁶ See Ronald Dworkin, “The ‘Devastating’ Decision,” *New York Review of Books* February 25, 2010, p. 39; David D. Kirkpatrick, “Democrats Try To Rebuild Campaign-Spending Barriers,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2010; and Americans for Campaign Reform, www.youstreet.org.

¹⁷ Robert A. Dahl, *On Political Equality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), x. Dahl believes that an alternative, hopeful outcome is also “highly plausible.” “Which of these futures will prevail depends on the coming generations of American citizens,” he writes.

¹⁸ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Inequality and American Democracy* (Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2005).

in America too often sharply conflicts with the country's best values and highest aspirations.

3.2. Envisioning a new order

Envisioning the new economy and a new politics involves three linked projects:

1. *The Values Project*. What are the core values to be prioritized and harmonized?
2. *The Transformations Project*. What transformations are needed in order to realize core values? What measures would best characterize and carry forward these transitions? It is not difficult to identify areas where transformative change is essential:
 - The market: from *laissez-faire* to regulation and governance in the public interest;
 - The corporation: from shareholder primacy to stakeholder primacy, from one ownership and motivation model to many;
 - Social conditions: from economic insecurity to security, from vast inequities to fundamental fairness;
 - Economic growth: from growth fetish to post-growth society, from mere GDP growth to growth in human welfare and democratically determined priorities;
 - Indicators: from GDP to accurate measures of social and environmental health and quality of life;
 - Consumerism: from consumerism and affluenza to sufficiency and mindful consumption;
 - Communities: from ruthless runaway enterprise to vital local economies, from rootlessness to rootedness and solidarity;
 - Dominant cultural values: from having to being, from getting to giving, from richer to better, from separate to connected, from apart from nature to part of nature, from transcendent to interdependent, from now to forever;
 - Politics: from weak democracy to strong, from corporatocracy to true popular sovereignty;
 - Global vision: from economic globalization to a planetary civilization worthy of the name, from invidious division to global citizenship;
 - Foreign policy and the military: from exceptionalism to interdependence, from hard power to soft, from war economy to peace economy.
3. *The Synthesis Project*. Presenting a positive, integrated vision of life in a world transformed is a powerful motivator of change. Narrative is important—telling a new American story and forging a new American dream.

3.3. Building capacity to promote change

Much needs to be done to strengthen capacities for transformative change. Areas needing attention include:

- “Progressive fusion” in politics: overcoming silos, forging a common progressive agenda, and uniting unexpected allies with shared values;

- Social movements: building a powerful movement for transformative change;
- Community actions: seeding the landscape with innovative “new economy” models;
- Key institutions: engaging the religions, local governments, youth, colleges and universities, and others;
- International solidarity: building ties to those abroad with common concerns;
- Crisis anticipation: getting ready for crises that will surely come;
- Ideas, research, and writing: building think tank capacities and linking ideas to action.

An important initial step is to identify and elaborate early initiatives and objectives that are plausible and not seemingly utopian but that create momentum towards long-term goals and shape future paths.

4. Conclusion

Historian Richard Hofstadter made the following interesting observation in *The American Political Tradition*¹⁹:

“Although it has been said repeatedly that we need a new conception of the world to replace the ideology of self-help, free enterprise, competition, and beneficent cupidity upon which Americans have been nourished since the foundation of the Republic, no new conceptions of comparable strength have taken root and no statesman with a great mass following has arisen to propound them...”

“Almost the entire span of American history under the present Constitution has coincided with the rise and spread of modern industrial capitalism. In material power and productivity, the United States has been a flourishing success. Societies that are in such good working order have a kind of mute organic consistency. They do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements. Such ideas may appear, but they are slowly and persistently insulated, as an oyster deposits nacre around an irritant. They are confined to small groups of dissenters and alienated intellectuals, and except in revolutionary times, they do not circulate among practical politicians.”

Times change. It is now clear that American society is no longer in “good working order.” It is time to foster ideas that challenge the “fundamental working arrangements.”

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), pp. vii–ix.