

All Aboard for the Steady State Revolution

Czech, Brian. 2000. Shoveling fuel for a runaway train: errant economists, shameful spenders, and a plan to stop them all. University of California Press, Berkely, California. x + 210 pp. \$ 22.50 (cloth), ISBN 0-520-22508-2; \$?? (paper), ISBN 0-520-22514-7

As Czech points out, when you board a train, the first thing you want to know is where it's going. Only then do worry about how long the journey will take. Where is our economy going? What is the ultimate end our economic system should provide for us? Our economic policy makers completely ignore the question of destination and concentrate solely on speed, furiously shoveling coal to achieve faster economic growth, though accumulating evidence suggests we will soon run out of track. Brian Czech argues that our destination should be a steady state economy, in which human population, capital stocks and consumption are all constant and within the constraints imposed by our finite ecosystem. Lower consumption requires less production and less work, and in the abundant leisure time of a steady state economy we would be free to develop our full potential as humans. Czech set out to write a widely accessible book on political economy to educate people as to why we need a steady state economy and to propose a plan for how to achieve it. Czech has admirably achieved his goals.

The book is entertaining, clear and informative, combining insights from different disciplines and distilling complex concepts into laymen's terms. As Czech points out, academics are not trained in nor rewarded for communicating their ideas to the broader public, and are little better at communicating to members of other disciplines. Yet no matter how brilliant the idea, unless communicated to the policy makers and populace, it is unlikely to have much impact. Further, most of the important problems confronting human society, such as those Czech

addresses, are too complex to be resolved or even understood using the insights, tools and methodologies of any one discipline. Czech has produced a public tract in popular language that fuses insights from ethics, economics, politics, sociology, ecology, evolution and psychology. Because it presupposes no advanced knowledge in any area, it is useful as a supplementary text in any number of courses that focus on environment, policy and/or economics. While condensed, the book supplies abundant and pertinent references for those who wish to learn more. The intended audience includes the broader public, and I could easily imagine an environmentally aware blue-collar worker enjoying the book on the way home from work. As Czech correctly argues, we need a revolution in public opinion if we are ever to achieve a steady state economy, and a revolution requires exposure to ideas. Czech's book is the best I have seen for communicating these ideas to the general public.

In just over 100 pages, part one ("The runaway train") offers five carefully composed chapters presenting the case for a steady state economy. The first chapter examines the American obsession with continuous economic growth. The next two chapters examine economic growth in the light of the physical and life sciences and rebut the economists' ever more convoluted explanations (substitution, efficiency and human capital) of how unending growth is possible. Czech also provides a concise history of economic thought tracing the existing obsession with growth back to its roots in neoclassical economic theory. He shows how the narrow disciplinary focus of traditional academia stifles the critical thinking necessary to develop a sustainable society, and examines the institutional support from business and government for the status quo. The absurdity of infinite growth on a finite planet is hardly news to ecologists, but the schism between university disciplines is so great that many economists

refuse to accept it. There may even be an ecologist or two that misses the link between growthmania and their own desire for a larger salary.

Following a chapter-long critique of Julian Simon (perhaps the most outrageous of the pro-growth theorists and an easy target) Czech ends the first section of his book with a brief but accurate and well-referenced introduction to ecological economics. This transdiscipline is a synthesis of the natural and social sciences that takes a systems approach to addressing the problems at the interface of economic and ecological systems, and is actively seeking a path towards a steady state economy. Czech's introduction provides enough content to excite both natural scientists interested in policy issues and economists interested in building scientific foundations for their discipline. He introduces the major thinkers and the major ideas with his accustomed clarity, but by attributing specific ideas to specific thinkers sometimes fails to convey their wide acceptance in the field. Czech stresses here that achieving a steady state economy will demand a real social revolution, a theme he develops in more detail later.

The second half of the book focuses on "Stopping the train" and is bound to be more controversial than the first. Czech calls for a 180-degree turnaround in our attitudes towards economic growth and towards the wealthy. He divides the population into three classes. The liquidating class is the richest (or highest consuming) one percent, the steady state class is the poorest 80%, and the amorphic class is the remaining 19%. He devotes a chapter to each class and examines their relationships with each other during a 'steady state revolution'. In a nutshell, he proposes that the steady state class ostracize (show pity and revulsion towards) the liquidating class, while remaining neutral towards the amorphic class. Specifically, on the assumption that conspicuous consumption serves the same purpose as a peacock's tail feathers, other classes should refuse to mate with the liquidating class, inducing them become steady staters. As

liquidators leave the rat race of competitive display for affection and esteem, they gain more time to pursue the highest levels in Maslow's needs hierarchy— self actualization— and lead more fulfilling lives. Czech develops this approach far more elegantly than I summarize here, but this is sufficient for the comments I have.

On the positive side, I strongly support his effort to fuse insights from evolution, economics and psychology into his strategy for achieving a steady state. He recognizes that such a complex problem cannot be solved with the tools and methods of any one discipline. His message that a steady state revolution does not involve sacrifices, but will instead improve our quality of life is vital if we are to have any hope of moving in this direction. Finally, he rightfully acknowledges that change will require a revolution in public opinion . On the negative side, the complexity at the heart of the problems we face also means that any single solution such as Czech proposes here will be inadequate. My main disagreement with Czech is that I believe shaming the rich into becoming sustainable will quite likely require more mass support than gradual policy changes that could cumulatively alter the fundamental structure of our economy. And a steady state economy will require fundamental changes in our economic system. The market economy is only competent at allocating goods that can be exclusively owned, but the biggest current worry is the loss of vital life support functions provided by our planetary ecosystem, such as climate stability, atmospheric gas regulation, etc. Yet no institution or technology could give an individual ownership rights to the ozone layer, for example, which leaves no incentive for the market to provide such goods. We need an economic system capable of allocating these critically scarce goods among carefully chosen ends. Currently, the liquidating class is playing by the rules of the game and winning. Rather than simply changing

our attitudes towards 'winners', we need to redefine the rules of the game, so that winning the game today does not destroy the playing field for future generations.

In the final analysis, Czech's suggestions may prove to be an important part of the solution, and his book will certainly spread the ideas and stimulate much needed discussion.

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