

BOOK REVIEWS

Not all environmentalists would worship such superb analytical philosophy as O'Neill's; however, O'Neill's philosophy is analytical, accurate and vigilant, and at the same time it is full of exciting examples, stories and anecdotes, and it is full of devotion. This is a rare combination, which should make this book accessible to those interested in an introduction to the philosophy and economics of the environment, as well as to any experienced and professional environmental philosopher or economist. Not only does this book summarise the debate so far; but it is a big step towards making this debate much more profound and inspiring.

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Global Catastrophes and Trends: The Next 50 Years

Vaclav Smil

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008

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For some reason or other, the dawn of a new century is likely to trigger visions of the future, and there is some probability that these visions may draw a doomsday picture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the 1910 appearance of Halley's comet caused widespread fears, not only of a direct hit but also of famines and pests. One hundred years later, there is no famous comet in sight, but even reading a newspaper can ruin the day, and not only for those with particularly pessimistic natures. In such situations it is helpful to have someone at your side who gives realistic assessments of what to expect and what not.

Vaclav Smil has presented such a book. His publication list on energy and environmental systems, often with a focus on China, and his expressed interest in the quantification of risks, along with a tentative title, whet the reader's appetite. Smil offers no more than a 'multifaceted attempt to identify major factors that will shape the global future'. Such stated humbleness adds to the appearance of credibility. However, the title already raises the tacit question how the author will bring natural catastrophes and societal trends together meaningfully, and with added value. The book's limitation to the next five decades of course helps to keep it within the perspective of its potential readers. On the other hand, this may underestimate problems, that build up slowly but inevitably – sea level rise induced by climate change is such a problem.

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Smil starts out with a thorough analysis of risks that would cause a discontinuation of (global) societies: encounters with asteroids, volcanic eruptions and global epidemics, but also human-made risks like 'transformational wars' (in Smil's terminology those that made powerful states collapse or emerge) and (inevitably) terrorist attacks. The author attempts to give detailed and precise probabilities of occurrence in order to put these risks in perspective. It is helpful to see that the probabilities for natural catastrophes that might fatally affect the whole globe are vanishingly small during the next 50 years, and much smaller than those for human-induced problems.

Consequently, the next chapter addresses global society. Instead of calculating probabilities, the author analyses historical data and current findings to depict 'unfolding trends'. Rightly, this starts with an assessment of the global energy system. Smil sees little chance for a quick transformation towards renewable energies, because of both the technical challenges and the lack of economic pressure, but for some unexplained reason he does not analyse the roles of politics and public opinion.

The author then moves on to socio-political trends. Smil identifies the 'retreat' of the United States from being the dominant global power as one of his key trends. The list of possible successors contains Europe (i.e. the EU), Russia and China, but even Japan and the 'Muslim world' receive extensive consideration. However, none of these candidates is found to be potent enough, at least within the next five decades. Only China will challenge the US in absolute terms, but not on a per capita basis.

In the third chapter, Smil addresses environmental change, first of all climate change, but also changes in water and nitrogen cycles, in ecosystems and biodiversity loss. Again, the physical effects are presented in great detail, while the assessment of effects on societies and the economy is rather brief and somewhat cursory. Given their importance for everyday life and politics, one would expect this to be more extended, even though the author rightly claims that there is great uncertainty involved with these results. Actually, the final chapter is about 'dealing with risk and uncertainty'. But even this remains somewhat shallow: after a quick exercise in quantifying risks and relating them to mortality, the author suggests keeping to rational attitudes and acting as risk minimisers.

In the end, the reader remains somewhat confused and ambivalent. The book has its strengths on the technical and natural science side, where precisely researched hard facts and a broad horizon go hand in hand. Putting infectious diseases into the focus (again) is a necessary task. The numerous statistical data make the text definitely a rich resource, though not always easy to read. But while it is easy to follow and share Smil's dislike of sce-

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narios and outlooks, the trouble remains that all these figures and data are pointless without a clear political or historical perspective, which is missing from the book. Despite the author's undoubted knowledge of historical facts, he fails to link things to actors, which is essential when analysing social and political processes. As an example, Smil's analysis of the 9/11 attacks hardly goes beyond saying that this was 'the date that changed everything'. Smil does not analyse what has changed, why it has changed, who were the actors and why they acted the way they did.

Other things could also be criticised. The list of superpower candidates appears very much inspired by the *zeitgeist* (Why the focus on the 'Muslim world', while not devoting comparable space to India, which is perhaps closer to global influence? Furthermore, Africa and South America are hardly present at all). Smil's style of criticism is often harsh and somewhat patronising (alternatives to a unipolar 'New World Order' are bluntly discarded). Some assessments in chapter 3 are revoked in chapter five 5 (what actually is the author's opinion about the future of the southwestern parts of the US: is there a Mexican *reconquista* going on or not?). Last but not least the number of typos is annoyingly high. But one could live with all that, had Smil dared to develop a more cogent message for the book. As it is, the book tells us not much more than that the future is uncertain.

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Landscape

John Wylie

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John Wylie's *Landscape* is one of several texts published under the auspices of the Routledge 'Key Ideas in Geography' series edited by Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine – a series which aims to provide strong, original, and accessible texts on important spatial concepts for academics and students working in the fields of geography, sociology and anthropology, and the interdisciplinary fields of urban and rural studies, development and cultural studies. Wylie's previous (and forthcoming) publications include single-author journal papers, editorials and book chapters on a diverse range of themes including spatial theory and philosophy, cultures of travel and exploration, and spectral geographies. He is perhaps best known, however, for his work on the cultural geographies of landscape, embodiment and performance and,



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