

Short Book on Environmental Sustainability

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In 2023, a book authored by Steven Cohen entitled "Environmentally Sustainable Growth: A Pragmatic Approach" was published by Columbia University Press (New York, pp. 241). The book comprises a preface, acknowledgments, six chapters, and conclusions. In the preface, the author stated that the Earth's resources are under pressure from 8 billion people. The political stability, security, and prosperity of the West "depend on the maintenance of material wealth where it exists and economic growth where people are poor" (p. IX). Through his book, he aimed to present a program for green economy that reconciles economic growth and environmental protection. However, in my opinion, his book is not entirely convincing.

In the preface, Steven Cohen listed causes of environmental degradation. Subsequently, he focused on renewable energy and government actions, such as funding, tax incentives, and financial penalties. He emphasized the need for change, using the example of the USA, in infrastructure, transportation, water supply, communication means, access to technology, public health institutions, and additionally, promoting a positive vision of an environmentally sustainable lifestyle in mass media.

In the first chapter, Steven Cohen posited the thesis that a "worldwide depression would cause more misery than a climate disaster" (p. 1). He attempted to explain what sustainable consumption and production entail. Essential for life, he recognized food, water, air, clothing, and shelter. Therefore, he advocated for an economic model in which producers retrieve products from consumers through recycling and a deposit system. He astutely observed that "corporations are not immune to environmental risk" (p. 18).

In the second chapter, Steven Cohen discussed the current state of environmental degradation, again using the example of the USA. He considered indicators of natural disasters related to climate change and the "climate swing". He included those that are human-induced, such as excluding earthquakes or volcanic activity. He specifically listed hurricanes, floods from rain, sea level rise, drought, forest fires, plastic pollution, toxins in ecosystems, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, air, water, and toxic soil pollution, as well as invasive species.

The third chapter is devoted to the causes of the environmental degradation: unregulated production technologies, pollution from warfare, mismanaged manufacturing operations, development of land that should be preserved, absence of environmental values and ethics, political pressure for rapid economic development and lack of understanding of the connection of environment to economic growth, underinvestment in environmental protection technologies, consumer demand for products that pollute and our seductive lifestyles, ignorance of science and environmental impacts.

In the fourth chapter, Steven Cohen presented a pragmatic strategy for reducing pollution and fostering renewable resources. He suggested that the government utilize public incentives for clean production and consumption, including regulations, tax benefits, and subsidies. For instance, implementing a deposit-return system for products could be beneficial, where customers receive a refund upon returning used goods. When discussing the USA, he highlighted an interesting point: the federal government controls over a quarter of all land in the United States. Therefore, he emphasized the significant role of the federal government in managing federal assets, implementing green transformation, and building a circular economy. He also stressed the need to refine indicators of sustainable development and allocate funds for research into green technologies.



In the fifth chapter, Steven Cohen criticized the state of public infrastructure in the USA, including the energy system, water and wastewater management (where 43 million people, or 15% of the population, rely on wells), waste management, transportation, healthcare, and communication. He advocated for building social capital for sustainable development through initiatives like training specialists. He considered sustainable development an essential component of management education. He linked it with social justice, inclusion, removing barriers, open access, promoting diversity, and engaging stakeholders.

In the sixth chapter, Steven Cohen discussed the need for a change in policy and communication methods regarding sustainable development. He emphasized the necessity of political consensus on this matter. He demonstrated that even a neoliberal government, under societal pressure, enacts environmental regulations. He aptly highlighted the role of parents in ensuring the health of their children. He believed that artists and cultural figures should create fictional heroes who lead sustainable lifestyles. He is correct in noting that people from rural areas often perceive the destructive effects of climate change more clearly than urban dwellers, as their livelihoods are directly impacted by droughts, hurricanes, floods, and fires. He identified a significant place for environmental ethics: protecting loved ones from harm that will befall them if we continue to destroy the environment.

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Steven Cohen is correct in advocating for sustainable economic growth. However, his approach appears, in my assessment, overly idealistic and utopian. It fails to account for economic, political, social, and cultural realities, especially geopolitical factors. I am concerned that his vision entails a form of state capitalism, wherein the government redistributes funds from taxpayers to entrepreneurs to promote a green economy—a form of environmentally justified central planning. He does not see the contradiction between capitalism and nature. He wrote, “consumption must change but cannot be reduced” (p. X), yet he aims to bring about changes in consumption through indirect government influence on the economy and societal education. In my opinion, this is insufficient. Unfortunately, the private capitalist sector will not take action unless directly compelled to do so by the government.

My doubts also arise regarding his concept of sustainable lifestyles. His positive vision of environmental sustainability is utopian. The criticism of conspicuous consumption is too weak. In my opinion, the solution lies in taxing the wealthy: a progressive consumption tax on consumption exceeding the carbon footprint. This may lead towards increased social control by governments utilizing artificial intelligence or even planned economy reminiscent of socialism. The situation could be as follows: a citizen can buy furniture, but if they purchase more within a specified period, they would pay a higher tax. Unfortunately, contemporary consumer goods, especially electronics and appliances like washing machines, are less durable than before because it is more profitable for manufacturers to produce “eco-friendly” junk than robust devices easy to repair and lasting for generations. Similarly, I do not share the author's enthusiasm for electric vehicles and his faith in green technologies.

The author leans towards the sharing economy and circular economy. In my opinion, this is not sufficient. We will not limit the consumption of natural resources unless we tax the consumption of the wealthy: helicopters, yachts, and reduce the waste of natural resources by government bureaucracy. The wealthy and politicians will always flaunt their wealth, showing that they can afford to destroy the environment, kill animals, and live at the expense of others. It is impossible to find a compromise between media-promoted wealthy celebrities ostentatiously consuming everything, intelligent people who have to watch, and the lumpenproletariat who cannot implement principles of sustainable development. It is impossible to discourage the wealthy from consumption, but it is possible to make their consumption more expensive than that of ordinary



citizens. Thus, both democratic elites and undemocratic regimes are burdens on the planet. Celebrities and caciques destroy the environment.

In my opinion, the sharing economy alone is not sufficient to protect the environment because it fuels turnover, increases profits for corporations acting as intermediaries between businesses and consumers, thus increasing pressure on the natural environment. Mass tourism poses a threat that must be limited through administrative measures.

For me, the military and cultural factors are intriguing. Modern wars result in mass destruction of ecosystems. However, S. Cohen focused only on two topics: the war in Ukraine and the threat associated with the destruction of nuclear power plants during wartime aggression. He omitted the issue of arms manufacturers as well as the lobbying for the production and sale of weapons in the USA.

Environmental actions in the West will be ineffective if environmental destruction continues in South America, Africa, and Asia. Transitioning to green economies in a small part of the globe while maintaining capitalist patterns of undemocratic resource exploitation elsewhere, and amidst the ongoing power struggles between nations, will not save us. Additionally, multinational regulations aimed at propagandistically transforming economies into “green” ones cannot plunge citizens into poverty. On the other hand, in a climate crisis, society may require governance through a system of bans, mandates, and incentives. Unlike S. Cohen, I believe that individual actions are important because they cumulatively impact the globe. While developing indicators for sustainable development is crucial, the widespread destruction of nature is evident and measuring it often loses its significance. Such actions should be stopped rather than measured.

I agree with the author that we need environmental ethics. It can be very simple: I will not do something because it destroys the environment. S. Cohen looks at this issue realistically: “an underlying cause of environmental degradation is that many people like their lifestyles and continue to advance consumer demands for products that pollute” and “demand for harmful products will not go away” (pp. 69-70). He also made readers aware of a very important issue: how much time do we spend on activities that harm the environment?

The proposed political, bipartisan consensus is, in my opinion, unattainable. Political leaders deliberately and knowingly provoke social conflicts and will not cooperate to protect the environment. They will not do so also because lobbyists and sponsors of their electoral campaigns have no interest in us living in a clean environment. Moreover, they exploit the intellectual deficiencies of parts of the society.

S. Cohen believes – and perhaps rightly so – that direct attacks on corporations by environmentalists do not bring us closer to solving the problem. However, the examples he provides of corporations engaging in sustainable business practices while violating workers' rights are difficult to comprehend.

His vision of a green transformation by mid-century is utopian. Naturally, one can believe in human creativity, which may save us from a climate catastrophe at the last moment. There is also another possibility: at some point, artificial intelligence will come into play, but nobody knows what it will do.

In conclusion, for me, the book is too general, and there are too many repetitions in the content. The chapters are fragmented into small segments full of general thoughts. The author does not hide his sympathy for Joe Biden, and using examples from the USA limits the reception of the book. Random digressions about the war in Ukraine are unnecessary. Nevertheless, several threads, which I tried to point out in the review, are valid and worthy of further discussion on sustainable development.

