Book review


Environmental Policy scholars working in English have benefited tremendously from Robert Paehlke’s work for well over 20 years. His books and many articles exhibit the typical Paehlke style – they are richly-researched, provocative, historically-grounded, timely, and not just a little optimistic. All of these characteristics are evident in his new book, *Democracy’s Dilemma: Environment, Social Equity and the Global Economy*.

Paehlke’s premise, reflected in the title of the book, is that ‘...global economic integration virtually requires some form of political integration’ (p. 2), but likely forms of global government provoke fears of authoritarianism or are dismissed outright as irrelevant utopianism. Very real obstacles of scale, coordination and conflicting national interests lie on the path to meaningful global governance.

Paehlke the optimist challenges both opponents and proponents of globalization from the center. He refuses to accept that economic growth and global trade ‘...require radically unequal income distribution and environmental destruction’ (p. 5). Paehlke the pragmatist advocates harnessing global markets so that they can balance social, economic, and environmental needs. Accordingly, he begins his book by (1) outlining the social and environmental pitfalls of globalization, (2) staking a middle ground between global Pollyannas and their critics (although his middle way is far more concerned with social equity and environmental protection than mainstream boosters might accept), and (3) asserting the imperative to add two more ‘bottom lines’ (social equity and environmental protection) to the economic one for acceptable globalization.

Following this discussion of the global problematique, Paehlke reviews the recent history of economic transitions that have brought us to the age of what he calls ‘electronic capitalism.’ Major economic transitions create winners and losers as well as boom and bust cycles, and valuable lessons can be learned from 19th and early 20th century industrialization, although many readers will find that these are not especially new nor easily applied to current problems.

In one of the book’s most successful polemics (chapter 3), Paehlke attacks the ‘media monolith’ for its part in weakening democracy (by limiting access to, and diversity of, mass media). The arguments and evidence in this chapter will not be new to any contemporary communications student. Still, Paehlke successfully places electronic media squarely at the center of any possibilities for reform – the media are key determinants of the democratic dilemma. (This chapter should be required reading of first-year public policy students in North American master’s programs.)

The middle of the book (chapters 4 and 5) articulates Paehlke’s conception of the three bottom lines for globalization, devoting considerable attention to measuring progress or failures on social, economic and environmental points.
This is not a policy wonk’s empty exercise, although academic policy analysts surely will appreciate the role Paehlke lays out for them to play. Rather, improvements and setbacks in health, education, welfare and environmental conditions ‘…should be treated as news, much as are the changes in economic growth and inflation statistics’ (p. 132). Better, more widely disseminated social and environmental data would permit more people to ask normative questions about economic growth and global trade. Paehlke is far from a data jock or a narrow reductionist – he insists on exploring the evidence underlying the most consequential and widely made claims regarding economic growth.

For example, it takes wider forms of data and a willingness to reconcile social equity with economic growth to ask questions like ‘…does rapid economic growth actually require public expenditure reductions?’ If so, then when public expenditures are maintained or increased rather than reduced ‘…is the loss in GDP not worth the potential gain … in quality of life? For whom is it worthwhile and for whom is it not?’ (pp. 143–144).

Paehlke devotes the book’s final chapters to the politics and policy of resolving the democratic dilemmas related to globalization. In addition to a long list of media reforms, meaningful solutions must occur at multiple scales, from the workplace to the nation state and beyond. (But these are no utopian silver bullets: Not only would they become quite implausible, any transition state would be exceedingly difficult to describe.) In one example, Paehlke imagines that increasing work-time reductions could pave the way for political and social re-engagement on the part of workers and their families (assuming fair wages for meaningful work, to be sure). However, this has not been the result of shortening the workweek in France, for example, where take-home pay has simply gone down, so the benefits of labor reforms may be more elusive than Paehlke’s appealing vision might suggest.1 He also relies heavily on the benefits that enhanced national democracy would bring to the global context. As he puts it, reformers could do with ‘…a wider appreciation of the need for global governance rooted in restored democracy at the level of the nation-state.’ Social justice, environmental protection and sustainable economic growth at the global level must draw, bottom-up, from models, practices and norms implemented at local and national scales.

Paehlke provides much more than the usual level of detail on the sorts of policies needed for effective and meaningful global governance. In essence, these consist of establishing global environmental protection, labor, human rights and social policy minima along with economic policy instruments for aiding their implementation. Paehlke recognizes that ‘…these are proposals without a politics,’ and that they would have to be brought about through political efforts, not by virtue of their innate rationality. On these topics, he succeeds more at policy analysis than political strategy, a common professional hazard. It is much easier to develop sophisticated policies than to forecast, say, political movements and their outcomes, especially when so few of the building blocks currently exist.

Overall, Democracy’s Dilemma offers artful synthesis rather than a wholly