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Review: Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet

By Kerryn Higgs

Reviewed by Byron Anderson

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Higgs, Kerryn. *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014. xxv, 384 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-02773-1, cloth, US \$29.95; ISBN: 978-0-262-32090-0, ebook, US \$20.95.

Beginning in the 1970s, a significant worldwide dichotomy developed when certain scientists representing ecological expertise began to favor economic growth over preserving the environment. As governments and policymakers worldwide slowly embraced arguments for continuous economic expansion as a solution to our problems, environmentalism took a back seat. *Collision Course* analyzes the 1980s neo-liberal economic movements and think tanks, primarily in the United States, Great Britain and Australia, that played a key role in getting nature to be viewed as a sector of the economy. This book covers a lot of territory, including the history and science of growth, consumerism, and propaganda. Arguments on each side of the debate are analyzed in some detail.

Ecological economists questioned, "Which comes first, the planet or the economy?" (p. 15). *Collision Course* devotes particular detail to the book, *The Limits of Growth* (1972), which became a best seller. Written by a team of MIT researchers and commissioned by the Club of Rome, an exclusive think tank, the book was followed up with two additional publications, *Beyond the Limits* (1992) and *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* (2004). These books, and others, especially from the United Nations, emphasized the perils of pollution, population growth, and ignoring ecology in economic calculations.

Attacks on *The Limits of Growth* came from those who were able to turn facts into opinion or theory. Conservative think tanks and contrarian scientists found that even doubt could undermine fact. Over time, ideas of a finite planet or global warming became embraced by many as a conjecture, hypothesis, and "doomsday" lunacy. Economic growth placed its emphasis on material progress and the individual, and was viewed as the only solution to poverty, if not to all social problems. Natural resources became measured in economic not physical terms, and progress evolved into an endless replacement of old needs with new. With the rise of the World Trade Organization and other trade organizations, free trade and free markets became the solution to the problems growth had generated. Economic growth trumped ecology by a barrage of corporate propaganda, the extensive reach of "economic education," and an elaborate think tank apparatus. Economic growth became the predominant "mantra of global institutions, governments, and the daily media" (p.21).

Collision Course will appeal to those with interests in the human impact on the natural world, our continuing disregard for the environment, and how economic growth trumped

ecology. Similar recent books on economics and the environment include *Ecological Limits and Economic Development* (2013) and *A New Blueprint for a Green Economy* (2013). Higgs, an Australian writer with a PhD in Geography and Environmental Studies, provides a unique contribution to this body of literature. Her call for a different kind of economy that includes environmental costs is sensible if not urgent. The text is supplemented with six figures, two tables, boxed inserts, and an appendix. Recommended for lay readers, ecological practitioners, and all academic and larger public libraries.

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