

here's hoping the corporate reformers will be left behind

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Vanishing Borders

Hilary French

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Between 1950 and 1998, world exports of goods increased 17-fold - from \$311 billion to \$5,400 billion. The number of transnational corporations grew from 7,000 to 53,600 between 1970 and 1998, the number of international refugees went up 16-fold between 1961 and 1998 (from 1.4 million to 22.4 million), and the average cost of a three-minute phone call from New York to London fell from \$245 in 1930 to \$3 in 1990.

In *Vanishing Borders*, Hilary French, the vice-president of the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, uses these and other data to imply that globalization, which she defines as 'a broad process of social transformation' involving growth in trade, investment, travel and communications as well as transboundary pollution and infection, is here to stay. She does not try to analyse how the process came about. Instead she focuses on its impact on natural systems.

As might be expected, this does not make encouraging reading. In chapters devoted to the timber trade, mining, atmospheric pollution, toxic chemicals, agriculture, infectious diseases and biodiversity decline, she gives us very carefully researched and clearly presented information on the often complex environmental and social problems connected with growing international trade and investment, and the movement of people and goods.

The chapter on pesticide trade is especially disturbing. We use fifty times more pesticides than we did fifty years ago, and the types we use now are ten times as toxic as those used then.. Exports of pesticides have risen nearly ninefold since the 1950s. Many shipments to the the Third World are of pesticides banned in their country of origin and, on arrival, they are often applied by farm workers with little knowledge of the products' hazards and without any adequate protective gear. According to WHO statistics, the result is that each year 25 million people in the Third World suffer at least one incident of pesticide poisoning and 20,000 of these die.,

While the description of the environmental and social impacts of globalization in *Vanishing Borders* is convincing and well-informed, the passages which describe and suggest solutions to the problems appear curiously pale and superficial. We learn about environmental treaties and green investment funds, emission limits and certification programs, the need for better technology for Third World countries, voluntary agreements between commercial companies, governments and NGOs. Although the author does worry about the fact that the World Trade Organisation (WTO) can strike down certification programmes, national environmental legislation and even international agreements on grounds of 'unfair trade barriers', she suggests only minor changes to both the WTO and the IMF and World Bank. Essentially, she accepts the status quo.

The whole book is permeated by the assumption that 'globalization' is irreversible and the most promising solution to the problems it causes is a firm world government, aided and supported by enlightened businesspeople and international NGOs. Absent or almost absent from the suggested solutions are the development of local economies, limiting the power of transnational corporations and of advertising, the abolition or radical reform of the World Bank and IMF, the support of local traditions and commons and land reform in the Third World, regulation of economic speculation by the Tobin tax or otherwise, nor yet trying to limit economic growth or international trade itself. The main roots of the problems are thus not addressed, and the author's position is in a way similar to that of reform Communists in Eastern Europe before the democratic revolutions who knew that many things were going wrong in their countries but wanted to correct them within the framework of the system which had caused them.

Despite such shortcomings, this is a very useful book for anybody who needs to get an overview of the current international environmental situation. It is well-researched and clearly and concisely written in the best tradition of Worldwatch Institute publications. Its target audience is obviously those in power and business-people who are interested in the environment but who might find a more radical analysis too threatening. The book will serve such people well. To go back to our analogy: in the Communist era in Eastern Europe, it was this group who started the reforms which then gained their own momentum and left their original protagonists behind.

Nadia Johanisova translated Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* into Czech. She teaches human ecology at the University of South Bohemia in the Czech Republic and helped found Rosa, an environmental organisation based in Ceske Budejovice.



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