



Solutions

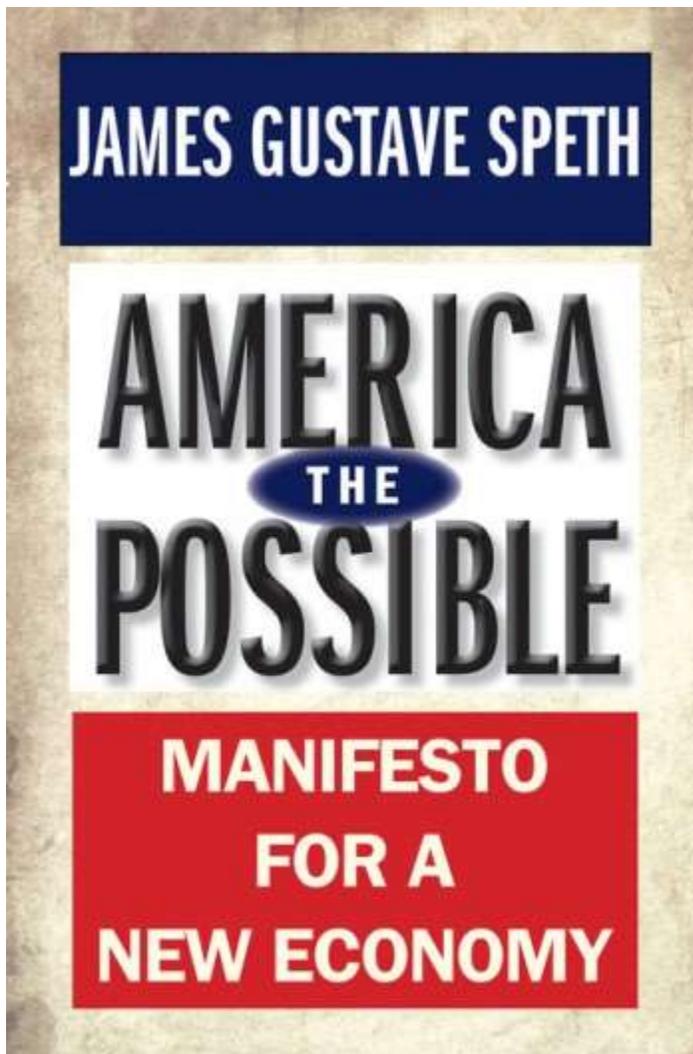
For a sustainable and desirable future

Search

Volume 4 | Issue 3 | Jul 2013

The Radicalization of America's Ultimate Insider

By [Michael Shuman](#)



Yale University Press

James Gustave (“Gus”) Speth’s manifesto, *America the Possible*, is a lucid summary of the progressive view of what ails the United States and how to fix it. At a time when forgettable blueprints for social change appear almost daily, this one stands out for being remarkably fresh, readable, and incisive.

In his opening chapters, Speth reviews the full range of social, economic, environmental, and foreign-policy challenges that face the country. He expresses a deep love for America, but cannot contain his alarm that, among industrialized countries, the United States has just about the highest rates of poverty, inequality, social immobility, incarceration, high-school dropouts, per-capita water consumption and carbon emissions, opposition to global treaties, and military spending.

Speth’s writing is particularly captivating when he describes the emerging environmental crises he has spent his life trying to prevent. No reasonable reader will be unmoved, for example, by his chapter on climate disruption, where he details the world we are about to inherit with coastal flooding, killer heat waves, massive famines, deadly epidemics, ghastly hurricanes, and millions upon millions of environmental refugees. “Right now,” says Speth, without mincing words, “the United States is the main stumbling block to climate action.” He deplores the irresponsibility of U.S. politicians who are under the spell of climate denialists funded by the fossil fuel industry and the Koch brothers.

Speth nevertheless devotes most of the book to plausible solutions. “It is not for lack of knowledge, technology, or thoughtful policy proposals that we face this overwhelming, colliding collection of problems. One can easily identify a set of intelligent policy responses to almost all of these challenges.” By collecting, sorting, and presenting cutting-edge policy proposals from the best analysts in their fields, he saves readers thousands of hours of reading.

Speth’s proposals not only include familiar liberal positions, such as raising taxes on the rich, placing carbon taxes on the most egregious greenhouse gas emitting corporations, and reining in Pentagon spending. He also makes the case for deeply radical proposals, which he calls “transformations.” He insists Americans abandon their obsession with economic growth, materialism, money-drenched politics, and militarism. He encourages Americans to reconnect with other traditions in their nation’s history: with Henry David Thoreau’s reverence for nature, with the religious founders’ quest for spirituality, and with the pioneers’ attachment to community. He makes the case for direct democracy, shorter work weeks, more leisure and family time, greater rights for corporate shareholders, higher minimum wages, and new measures of prosperity like the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI).

This agenda is remarkable, less for its specifics (few of which are new), and more for the fact that a man *Time* magazine once called the “ultimate insider” is putting it forward. More precisely, Speth has been the ultimate environmental insider. He helped launch two of the nation’s most influential—and elite—organizations for ecological protection: the Natural Resources Defense Council and the World Resources Institute. He served as Jimmy Carter’s White House environmental advisor. He then became dean of the prestigious Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and is now a law professor at the University of Vermont.

This book can be read as a memo to the entire U.S. environmental establishment—the hundreds of thousands of respectable greenies who inhabit legislatures, public agencies, corporate boardrooms, foundations, law firms, and think tanks. And Speth’s message is clear: the era of incremental environmental change is over. He counsels environmentalists to break bread with the broader progressive movement. “For their part, environmentalists need to see that real progress on their issues will remain elusive unless the liberal agenda of social justice and political reform is steadily realized. In a land of pervasive economic insecurity and stark inequality like ours, American environmentalists will keep losing.”

“[H]ere’s the ultimate [question] as far as this book and I are concerned: How do progressives drive real change?” Speth is convinced that a majority of the American people, with enough education, can be brought around to the progressive point of view.

On this judgment, I must confess, I’m less confident. Perhaps the deepest consistent strand of American politics, as evident today as it was at the founding of the country, is a deep suspicion toward centralized power. And only a progressive politics consistent with decentralization and focused on state experimentation, I would argue, can possibly achieve the goals Speth has so compellingly laid out.

As an advocate for localization, I’m heartened to see Speth embrace the principles of economist E.F. Schumacher, the blueprints of the Transition Towns movement, the vision of a nation of small banks and local businesses, the proliferation of better structures for triple-bottom-line business (public enterprises, self-financing nonprofits, employee stock ownership plans, cooperatives), and a commitment to ending awful corporate attraction policies that dominate economic development. (I was also heartened that he excerpted a piece I recently wrote on new indicators for community prosperity.) Yet, I am left wondering if, at the end of the day, Speth remains committed to a strong nation-state and sees localization as a tactic toward that end rather than as an end in itself.

Can one simultaneously promote the local economy-building of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, and then turn around and support economist Jamie Galbraith’s proposal that federal agencies confiscate capital, engage in massive public planning, and reinvest on behalf of national priorities? Is it consistent to propose tighter national control of the money supply and then to laud local currencies? Can we eliminate corporate loopholes and still expand subsidies for green jobs? Can we be confident that a larger welfare state will not also enhance the imperial power of the president or the power of corporate lobbyists?

For me, America cannot simultaneously become Sweden and Switzerland. While I share many of Speth’s progressive aspirations, I bristle at many of the top-down proposals he showcases—to redistribute wealth, to mandate maximum-income limits, to impose new “stakeholder” structures on all businesses, to patrol advertising, and to declare “National Reflection” days. We cannot simply replace one set of untrustworthy and inhumane institutions, like global banks and corporations, with another set of untrustworthy and inhumane institutions run by big government.

Speth appears to be sorting out his views on governance, and he does seem to understand that the most radical changes he seeks in the American people—in their values, their lifestyles, their relationships, their daily priorities—cannot possibly be driven by the federal government. Personally, I hope the next step in his radicalization is to reject statist proposals altogether.

I’m especially encouraged that Speth begins one of his final chapters with this quote from Theodore Roosevelt: “The majority of the plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any smaller body of men will make in trying to govern them.” That very same founder of Bull Moose Progressivism was urging us to rely, wherever possible, on the genius of the market where it works and the innovations of local government and civil society where it doesn’t. If Speth’s progressivism moves in this direction, he will be heartened to find not a few Republicans (as T.R. himself was) eager to embrace this agenda and make the “possible” in America politically probable.