

Book reviews

Escaping “Fortress Earth”

Edited by Paul Raskin

Tellus Institute

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Reading *Journey to Earthland* by Paul Raskin is an extraordinary experience.

Raskin is not only a master navigator of the complexities of our world but someone who conveys a vision of the future that manages to surmount the unprecedented challenges facing humanity at several levels of social, cultural and ecological being. His vision of a humane future for the peoples of the world is fully sensitive, as well, to the need for transforming the modernist relationship with nature based on domination, exploitation and alienation that has resulted in an ecological backlash that threatens our well-being, and even raises doubts about the survival of the human species. And perhaps most remarkable of all, Raskin not only depicts a future that is convincingly portrayed as necessary and desirable, but also shows us that its attainment is within the domain of the attainable, although not presently *politically* feasible. Raskin is also realistic enough to acknowledge that his whole project is vulnerable to a counter scenario, Fortress World, which could with tragic results supersede his vision of a humane and sustainable future.

To make Raskin's ideas about a desired and desirable future a viable *political project* is the underlying mission of JTE. To succeed with such a mission

requires mobilizing sufficient support based on a credible conception of why we are not foolish to enlist in the civil society movement dedicated to take us from where we are to where he wants us to be.

In an important sense, the book falls outside the typical genre of futurist writing because it is preoccupied with how to close this gap between the necessary and the feasible, and in the process, situate a desirable future within the realm of the attainable. It is in this regard, with a certain exuberance of expectations, that Raskin pins his hopes on the emergence of a robust global citizens movement that will challenge the status quo by mobilizing people around the world sufficiently to reach a tipping point that allows a new political consciousness to take over enough venues of governmental, economic, cultural and spiritual authority to facilitate transition to the humane future being advocated. There is no doubt in my mind that this book is a culminating expression of Raskin's own journey, as well as an indispensable gift to the rest of us, providing the best available set of conceptual tools to engage interactively with human destiny and, especially, to see bright shafts of light beyond the darkness being produced by present trends. In what is essentially an extended essay, Raskin sets forth concisely, with flourishes of intellectual elegance, all we need to know and do to achieve this benevolent future.

JTE describes the contours of a desirable future, including the adjustments that must take place at the level of values and consciousness, essentially a turning

away from consumerist and materialist conceptions of the good life without relinquishing the gains of modern science and technology. What Raskin envisions is a more spiritually enlivening sense of the meaning of life to be realized qualitatively through leisure, enjoyment of nature, inner serenity and a satisfying lifestyle that is liberated from the tensions and anxieties of a typical capitalist life experience. The society thus envisioned would no longer be appraised by the quantitative criteria of growth and wealth, which have led to gross disparities of life circumstances – extremes of poverty for the many and wealth for a few – disparities that can only be sustained over time through reliance on manipulation and coercion.

Raskin imaginatively shapes a socially attractive future based on post-materialist core values and the accompanying need to gain political empowerment through reliance on the renewed energy of persons awakened to this challenge and inspired by the potentialities of the journey. He is clear about the need for people in civil society to be the main vehicle for realizing this transformative vision, and is convincingly skeptical about such a desirable future being achieved by existing economic and political elites whose consciousness is largely a captive of the modernist embrace of neoliberal structures, militarism and a materialist understanding of the human condition. In a fundamental respect, Raskin's call to action rests on an ethics of responsibility that asks each of us to join in this great work of composing a different future than what is being shaped by the dominant macro-trends of the world as now constituted.

We need to keep in mind that a desirable future remains possible despite present trends appearing to prefigure a disastrous future (that is, Raskin's Fortress World). Under

these circumstances, we who believe in the JTE vision need to be responsive to a double challenge – first, the strong responsibility to act, and second, the duty to learn to become trusted navigators throughout the long journey to Earthland. This burden of civic responsibility is the essential feature of what it means to feel, think and act as a global citizen, inspiring a pilgrimage from the here-and-now to the there-and-then. Because this is a hazardous journey to be undertaken without the benefit of a map that charts the proper route, I have described the ideal global citizen as “a citizen pilgrim”, an image that Raskin also affirms, which disavows dogma and blueprints of the future, and is reliant on innovation, flexibility and a readiness to make course corrections *en route*.

Let me turn to raise a few questions that might prompt further reflection and commentary. I have read JTE while on a lecture tour in Pakistan, and have been struck by the relevance of social location. I spent several days in Karachi, a security-obsessed, impoverished, yet vibrant city of over 22 million people, most of whom are struggling with the multiple urgencies of daily existence while the privileged elites seal themselves off from the masses in heavily guarded gated luxury housing. True, there are many young idealistic persons in Pakistan devoted to human rights and environmental protection who are active in an array of local communities, but these brave souls are often threatened by religious extremists who reject any solution for the torments of the present that are not centered on a prior embrace of fundamentalist versions of Islam. I found that social priorities in Pakistani society are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the immediate and the local: paying for the necessities of a bare life, opposing forced

evictions from their homes in the city to make way for a shopping mall or a gentrified neighborhood, protesting the assassination of a social activist who was perceived as a threat to religious zealots and lending emergency assistance to the victims of a natural disaster – flood or earthquake – by providing desperately needed medical supplies, food and shelter. What I am asking myself, while hoping for guidance from Raskin, is whether Pakistanis can read JTE without dismissing it as the musing of a Westerner not faced with the intense existential pressures that dominate the lives of most residents of Karachi, and much of the Global South, as well as many inner cities in the North.

In effect, how relevant is social location and cultural ambience? Would Raskin write the same book if his consciousness had been shaped by a lifetime of struggle in Karachi-like circumstances? These questions raise others. Is there more than one journey to Earthland? Are there alternative Earthlands? Do we need a multi-civilizational articulation of desirable and possible, and hopefully convergent, futures written by ethically and spiritually sensitive individuals who see the world around them and a preferred future from within the imaginative spaces of their varied social locations and cultural milieus?

Are there practical ways to overcome or diminish this reality characteristically prevailing in the West with that in the Global South? What might deepen understanding, and even help reduce the obstacles, would be to convene a worldwide gathering, perhaps an online forum, of public intellectuals from around the world to engage in a continuing dialogue on the main theses of JTE. The objective would be to produce a collective response to JTE, or if that proved to be impossible, then to solicit alternative visions of

desirable planetary futures, including the politics of transformation. Along the way, a global community of citizen pilgrims would form, and set its own agenda. Would it not be illuminating and potentially transformative to have such a gathering, either digitally or preferably in a face to face format, dedicated to planning “a journey [or journeys] to Earthland”?

On the basis of recent experience in various parts of the world, I believe that political and economic systems as now operating would do all in their power to break the will and organizational integrity of any global citizens movement that managed to get off the ground. I happened to be in Tahrir Square in Cairo two weeks after the Egyptian people made history in 2011 by suddenly rising to overthrow a corrupt and oppressive tyrant, Hosni Mubarak. There was much popular excitement in the aftermath of this historic occasion, the thrill of an empowering nonviolent populist movement giving rise to the confidence that the future would bring to Egypt a democratic political order, a far more equitable economy and respect for the dignity of individual Egyptians. And yet, two years later, the Egyptian people again exhibited their agency, but this time to support a bloody coup against the elected political leadership that has brought to power a more repressive military governing process in Egypt than had existed during the three decades of Mubarak’s dictatorial rule. This improbable political reversal reflected the strength of counterrevolutionary forces that will do whatever it takes to prolong the ascendancy of the old order that privileges dominant elites at the expense of the citizenry as a whole. Applying this understanding to the vision of Earthland, isn’t it important to envision the future from a less linear, and more dialectical, standpoint, as the unfolding of an

epic struggle between opposed worldviews and their civilizational embodiments? In historical periods of transition, contradictory responses reflect forces of deep discontent and alienation on one side while exhibiting the aspirations of the hopeful and compassionate on the other.

This leads to another concern. In the aftermath of the Cold War, there was a widespread belief that democratization was the inevitable wave of the future. After the collapse of the Soviet Union (and Russia's subsequent eagerness to be part of the neoliberal world order) and the opportunistic participation of China in the capitalist structures of trade and investment, it seemed that there was an emergent planetary future premised on a victorious combination of market-oriented economics and constitutional democracy. Almost three decades later, it is evident that something has happened to that firm ground of political legitimacy on which we seemed to be standing after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We are now increasingly living in an era of the popular, and not just the populist, autocrat who, once elected, administers a strong state with an iron fist. That is, peoples in many countries are electing leaders by democratic means that are blatantly dismissive of human rights and political freedom, and oblivious to the mounting dangers of climate change.

In every corner of the world, right-wing ultra-nationalist, militarized governments that promise to bring order and security are being chosen by voters over those that offer the rewards of democratic pluralism and responsible attitudes toward climate change, nuclear weapons and other challenges of global scope. Whether it is Putin in Russia, Abe in Japan, Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines, Erdogan in Turkey or Sisi in Egypt, the

pattern of *popular* authoritarianism is evident even if explanations in the various national settings are quite diverse. This distressing pattern of regressive politics can also be seen in the resurgence of proto-fascist parties in Europe, arising in the wake of mass discontent with existing economic and social policies. Their anti-immigration and chauvinist priorities prefigure the character of a Fortress World. The Brexit vote in Britain and the Trump phenomenon in the USA are likewise illustrative.

In other words, in even the most benevolent transition from the modern to the planetary that Raskin so clearly depicts, it is important to appreciate that bad things are bound to happen along the way. Such awareness guards against disillusionment. This surge of populist passion for ultra-nationalism from below and securitization from above poses a serious challenge to the JTE project. Maybe it is necessary to begin asking ourselves whether under the pressure of the times we, the peoples of the world, can abide the uncertainties of substantive democracy (human rights, diverse political movements)? In effect, how should this global crisis of democracy be properly introduced into a discussion of the role of the global citizens movement that is integral to Raskin's transformative hopes?

It is possible that this disturbing populist trend currently sweeping the globe will be short-lived, dying of its own deadening weight. There are definite steps that can be taken to restore public confidence in democracy and human rights, which seem indispensable features of a humane Earthland. It is important that the dynamics of economic globalization become committed to diminishing inequality within and among states. It is also necessary to balance a preoccupation with the efficiency of capital and the statistics

of economic growth against the goals of ending poverty, addressing climate change and creating conditions of work and human and ecological security that enhance the quality of life for rich and poor alike. Other kinds of constructive policy initiatives include reducing the waste of resources on militarization and ending reliance on forcible intervention in foreign societies without proper UN authorization.

A further relevant effort would be the recognition that some of the pressures being mounted against democracy in the West arise from the mass migration of desperate people seeking to escape from war torn conditions and the havoc caused by global warming. Until the root causes of these migrations, and the accompanying terrorism generated by extremist political reactions, are addressed, it will not be possible to reverse this right-wing populist trend. These migrations occur when conditions become intolerable, and the pressure to escape to safer places becomes so intense that desperate persons willingly take huge risks. When large numbers of such people in need arrive at the borders of prosperous countries in the West, especially given manipulated fears that terrorists are lurking in the midst of the migrants, right-wing demagogues have a field day. The most constructive response patterns are to do all that can be done to remove the conditions that give rise to the intolerable conditions, that is, deter migration at its source.

I suppose, in the end, I am saying that there are some issues that need to be more fully addressed before people outside the still relatively liberal democratic West can be expected to sign up for the journey to Earthland. In effect, in places like Pakistan where the struggle to find out how to be a constructive *national* citizen seems such a current preoccupation for those who

seek to be politically responsible, an essential challenge is how to present Raskin's message of the responsible *global* citizen in forms sufficiently relevant that it is sensitive to the fears, hopes and concerns of this part of the world.

In conclusion, it may appear captious to expect more when JTE already gives us so much. At the same time, when Raskin raises hopes this high, it becomes even more important to begin the journey with eyes wide open. Otherwise, the prospects of early disillusionment are high. Remembering that this is a planetary journey already underway in a variety of forms may be of some help, along with the realization that there exist multitude points of entry throughout the planet. The recognition of this multiplicity ensures that a truly global citizen acts inclusively toward the range of civilizational identities.

Richard Falk

Richard Falk is Co-director, Project on Global Climate Change, Human Security, and Democracy at Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California, USA.

About the author

Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Fellow of the Orfalea Center of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He directs the project on Global Climate Change, Human Security and Democracy at UCSB and formerly served as director the North American group in the World Order Models Project. Between 2008 and 2014, Falk served as UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine. Richard Falk can be contacted at: falk@global.ucsb.edu