

Book Review

Review of *A Contract with the Earth* by Newt Gingrich and Terry L. Maples, Johns Hopkins University Press, 222 pages.

Reviewed by C. A. Bowers

Newt Gingrich is once again demonstrating how easy it is to use the power of words to mislead the public. His new book, *A Contract with the Earth*, which he coauthored with Terry Maple, is intended to perform the same political magic achieved by the *Contract With America* in changing the direction of American politics. The ideological continuity between the two books can be seen by recalling his leadership in the 1994 movement to align government with the five market liberal principles that would put “American civilization” back on the path to greatness. The five guiding principles—individual liberty, economic opportunity, limited government, personal responsibility, and security at home and abroad—were simple code words for reducing welfare and thus privatizing poverty, unleashing corporations to pursue profits without regard for the human or environmental cost, and to make the military/industrial complex one of the dominant features of society. The contract was not really with America, but with the market liberals who had, by 1994, succeeded in getting the majority of the public to think that their agenda was about conserving all that was good about America.

Gingrich and Maple seem bent on exploiting the power of an oxymoron to again confuse the public about what their real agenda is. The Introduction by E. O. Wilson masks the shell game that Gingrich and Maple are playing with the public, especially with the growing number of environmentalists. Wilson expresses surprise that such a prominent political conservative, referring to Gingrich, could “generate such a vision.” As Wilson notes, Gingrich is restoring conservatism to its original, full meaning. Namely, what the Latin *conservare* originally meant: to save and treasure what proved best for humanity. Having Wilson write the Introduction was a brilliant strategy, especially since

most people identify Wilson as being a leading environmental spokesperson—and not with his arguments that all the religions of the world should be replaced with the theory of evolution, that the brain is a machine, and that moral values are encoded in our genes. But Wilson’s walk down the path of scientism is not the issue here. The main question is whether Gingrich has undergone a change in thinking, and has left behind the market liberal ideology that is now expanding markets on a global basis, spreading poverty in its wake, and rapidly reducing the ability of natural systems to regenerate themselves.

Gingrich and Maple fill the pages of *A Contract with the Earth* with examples of local environmental restoration efforts, including the efforts of scientists and engineers to develop technologies that have a smaller ecological footprint. Indeed, there are pages and pages documenting what they interpret as the greening of America. However, a careful reading of how these efforts are to be further strengthened reveals that Gingrich and Maples have not strayed from the market liberal ideology that was intended to complete the Reagan Revolution, which President George W. Bush has been putting on steroids while laying the groundwork for a total surveillance society that many Americans are beginning to back away from. What will surprise many readers is that while Gingrich is best known as a key player in the 1994 Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, he was also a professor of environmental studies and a promoter of conservancy efforts in his home state of Georgia.

Unfortunately, his experiences as an environmentalist have not altered his way of understanding how the contract with the earth is to be carried out, nor has Maples tempered Gingrich’s market liberal orientation. Together they write about the importance of basing environmental decisions on hard evidence, the danger of doomsday scenarios and environmental hysteria (the latter is a reference to Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*), and the need to educate more scientists and engineers who they view as essential to slowing the rate of environmental degradation. Interwoven between examples of successful technological innovations and grass-roots environmental initiatives in different parts of the country is the main political message. As the authors put it: “Free enterprise is not the enemy of the environment; it is the engine that will drive promising alternatives to failed practices.” They continually urge environmentalists to adopt the “entrepreneurial spirit” that will put saving the environment high on the list of the yet to be exploited market opportunities. To further solidify this ideological orientation in the minds of their readers they include the following Talking Points” at the end of chapters: “Garrett Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ suggests that ownership, or the perception of ownership,

facilitates conservation”; “Hardly adversaries, business and conservation organizations have formed compatible partnerships to achieve win-win solutions in the real world”; “Big Oil’s investment in solar, wind, and biofuels suggests that corporations are getting serious about alternative forms of energy,” “If government can continue to support tax incentives, new technologies may succeed in capturing significant market share and turn the corner toward a cleaner future.” Aside from their major misunderstanding of the point Garrett Hardin was making about the impact on the commons by possessive individualism, they continually represent the fox (capitalism) as bent on saving the inhabitants of the henhouse. Their contract is really a contract with corporations that adopt a green vocabulary and pursue market share while appearing to be concerned with repairing the damage they have caused in the name of progress and freedom.

The silences in the arguments of Gingrich and Maple for making the free enterprise system, along with government tax incentives that will lower the risks for corporations, essential to carrying out the Contract with the Earth are particularly noteworthy. The authors are silent about Gingrich’s collusion with powerful corporate and labor groups in resisting the mandatory reductions of carbon emissions called for by the Kyoto Accords. The brief references to the Kyoto Accords frame Gingrich’s collusion as an act of a patriot resisting a flawed international agreement. There are other silences in how Gingrich and Maples understand the steps that must be taken in slowing the rate of environmental change. These include their failure to mention that the addiction to a consumer dependent lifestyle fostered by the market liberal/corporate culture is one of the major contributors to the ecological crises. Given the long record of exploiting the environment in order to expand markets and profits, it would seem that Gingrich and Maple would at the very least have identified one of the major flaws in the free enterprise system: namely, that it has no self limiting principles governing what can be turned into a commodity or monetized. In effect, Gingrich and Maple assume that the capitalistic system, which equates both growth and progress with increasing profits, will transform itself into a steward of the earth and thus ensure the prospects of future generations.

An equally serious silence is their failure to recognize the community-centred alternatives to the hyper-consumer lifestyle that is required by the morally unregulated free market system. While scientists and engineers are working to conserve what remains of the environmental commons, the cultural commons are being rapidly undermined by the efforts of the modern trinity of market liberal politicians, corporations, and the military establishment which are attempting to expand the

frontiers of the American empire. The cultural commons, which vary from culture to culture, encompass the intergenerational knowledge, skills, and systems of mutual support that have enabled generations from the beginning of time to live largely independent of a money economy. While there are examples of the cultural commons that oppress others, most activities—which range from the preparation and sharing of food, narratives and the creative arts, craft knowledge and skills, ceremonies and games, civil liberties, patterns of mutual support and mentoring relationships, and even language itself—have a smaller adverse impact on natural systems and are less dependent upon participation in the money economy that is now being manipulated by corporate interests. The cultural commons exist in every community, but the emphasis on connecting education to creating an efficient workforce for the twenty-first century, which market liberals such as Gingrich and Maples associate with educating scientists and engineers (people who know how to use “objective and hard data,” as they put it) has further weakened the intergenerational bonds and patterns of interdependencies essential to the viability of the cultural commons. As youth graduate without the practical intergenerational knowledge of how to become less dependent on the money economy, they enter the cycle of consumerism, debt, and economic insecurity, which begins and ends with the vast amount of waste and toxic bi-products required by the industrial system of production and consumption.

In short, a less ideologically driven contract with the earth would make the revitalization of the world’s diversity of cultural commons part of the strategy for conserving what remains of the environmental commons. Equating progress with economically colonizing the world’s cultural commons, which in turn requires the American military to protect the frontiers of this empire, has two related consequences. First, the continual increasing of the military budget promotes the market liberal agenda of reducing the government’s responsibility in addressing social justice issues, such as providing welfare for the poor and marginalized, which was a major goal of Gingrich’s *Contract with America*. Second, it creates an unending series of crises that benefit corporations, such as the over two billion dollars in profits that the testing industry is making from the “No Child Left Behind” educational reform, and the hundreds of billions in profits being made by corporations supporting the military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The environmental damage of these military operations, along with the damage caused by the global exploitation of resources, also have been ignored by Gingrich and Maple. An ideology exerts a powerful influence on what will be the focus of attention, what will be ignored, and what will be repeated in a formulaic way—even by people who

think of themselves as speaking on behalf of the well being of others and the environment. In summary, both Gingrich and Maple remain market liberal ideologues, and their education as environmentalists has failed to introduce them to the diversity of the world's cultural commons, whose regeneration should be part of any contract with the environment.

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