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Book Review: Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet by of Kerryn Higgs

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KERRY HIGGS

Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014. 416 p. \$29.95.

According to Kerry Higgs, the MIT scientists producing *The Limits to Growth* (1972) accurately foresaw the fast-approaching “collision” between global economic growth and finite natural resources. Their work was attacked, largely by economists, not because of any flaw in their science but simply because they questioned the possibility of endless economic growth, the cornerstone of twentieth-century capitalism’s effort to convince all of the beneficence of the free enterprise system. In Parts I to III the author rewinds twentieth-century history three times to explain how it came to be that policymakers, and to a large extent the general public, chose to ignore the sober warnings of objective scientists and to embrace the improbable claims of those contending that a finite planet could provide the infinite resources that endless economic growth entails, as well as the bottomless “sink” needed to deal with its waste products. Part I sets the stage with an account of “the history and science of growth” up to the publication of *The Limits to Growth*. Higgs places Garrett Hardin (“Tragedy of the Commons”) and Paul Ehrlich (*Population Bomb*) outside the mainstream of ecologically enlightened critics of economic growth, observing that traditional peoples managed their commons very wisely and that Hardin’s lifeboat ethics and Ehrlich’s calls for coercive sterilization represented a philosophy of needless cruelty. She calls the largely overlooked mid-century works of Fairfield Osborn and William Vogt prescient in their focus on the excessive environmental cost of economic growth, although she admits that their simplistic Malthusianism blamed the poor for their own poverty. She sees Malthus as a defender of elite interests who constructed a false “population growth” rationale for poverty and dismisses Marx for not accurately assessing the limits of his “endless economic growth” communist solution to poverty. Part II traces how capitalists constructed “consumerism” early in the twentieth century to ensure that enough demand existed to fuel continuous economic growth. After World War II the First World’s “development project” for the less developed world helped spread global consumerism, and its late-century neoliberal policy recommendations further solidified universal growth prescriptions. Part III, also from the starting point of the early twentieth century, examines the emergence of the corporation and later the transnational corporation as economic and political entities. As the century progressed, transnational corporations exercised increasing control over many governments and international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, always expounding an agenda of endless economic growth. Higgs notes that in the twenty-first century the World Trade Organization’s judgments on appropriate environmental standards can overturn those of any country. In a brief Part IV, Higgs compares the world’s current conditions to those predicted forty years earlier in *The Limits to Growth* and finds a close correspondence. In this provocative critique

of the endless growth agenda, the author does sidestep some population issues. She avoids, for example, discussing any role economic growth might have played in bringing about widespread fertility decline.—D.H.

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