

Creating a sustainable American Dream: drop the SUVs, grow a community garden and translate environmental justice into mainstream policy

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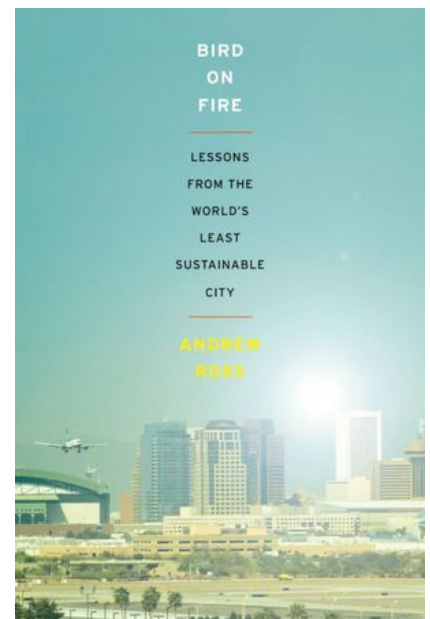
*How do we change from unsustainable lifestyles to more ethically responsible ones? In **Bird on Fire**, **Andrew Ross** charts the lessons we must all learn from the world's least sustainable city, and stresses a strong social message: that **sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing the problems of and learning from the grassroots** – from indigenous populations – even, and this would generate ripples of shock among Republican senators, from minority and ethnic immigrants. Reviewed by **Ayona Datta**.*



Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World's Least Sustainable City.
Andrew Ross. OUP USA. November 2011.

Bird on Fire is a tour de force of the sustainability credentials of “the world’s least sustainable city”: Phoenix, Arizona. Its author, Andrew Ross, a Professor in social and cultural analysis at New York University, details the different aspects of sustainability in terms of social, economic and ecological in a very approachable and engaging style.

But the book is not just about Phoenix or its potential for becoming a sustainable city; it is a lesson to planners, politicians, activists and others engaged with the bigger questions of ethics and responsibility towards our future generations. The discussions in the book indicate a methodology that is not only a meticulous search for archival and documentary materials on the subject, but also detailed interviews with a large number of stakeholders and decision-makers on the city’s road to unsustainability. Interspersed with these are timely and thoughtful reminders of social critiques on environmental justice, political ecologies and urban citizenships. It is in raising these wider issues of governmentality, neo-liberalism, global capitalism and grassroots democracy where this book really shines.



The book consists of an introduction and eight chapters. The introduction charts out the rationale and methodology for focusing on Phoenix. The author notes that if Phoenix can become sustainable, so can any other city. In a calamitous tone, Ross notes that since “global warming is the slowest apocalypse of all” (p.23) this is the reason why it is hardest to propose remedial action around this issue. This is followed through in Chapter 1, ‘Gambling at the Water Table’, which begins with a history of the Arizona region in relation to the ecological history of indigenous Hohokam settlements and then to more recent history of urbanization and sprawl. In this splendid analysis, Ross examines how dwindling water supplies led to the Hohokam’s demise, and draws parallels with Phoenix’s current disregard of this finite resource. He reveals how history is itself manipulated by drawing our attention to the power of ‘expert’ knowledge in retelling history. Ross cites an article published by academics in Arizona which confirms archaeological ‘evidence’ that immigrant overpopulation was the cause of Hohokam decline. Drawing connections between xenophobia and the denial of environmental apocalypse, Ross illustrates how social and cultural ideologies around race, class and ethnicity construct knowledge production and awareness of sustainability in the region.

The book moves on to chart the boom in Phoenix’s housing market, spurred on artificially by a “developer creates growth” culture. Ross suggests that the housing boom which spurred the growth of Phoenix was essentially artificially induced in order to accelerate GDP – the measure of prosperity. A critique of Phoenix’s zoning and planning system, this chapter illustrates the irony of sustainability discourses and practices in Phoenix. Especially noteworthy is the failure among politicians and decision-makers in Phoenix in comprehending sustainability. The description of climate change by a Republican senator is both petrifying and comical when he says “greenhouse emissions, it sounds evil, but it’s not – it means flourishing of life. If you look at what a greenhouse is, it’s a place where life can grow, and it’s great for plants and plants need humans, and humans need plants.” (p.61).

Chapter 4 takes a more detailed look at the notion of environmental justice in the migrant and working-class neighbourhoods south of Phoenix. These areas of the city hosting a disproportionate number of hazardous sites and minority populations living there are directly exposed to the risks of a history of continuing toxic legacy. The irony of this politics, Ross argues, is that environmental justice is fought both internally (with community leaders) as well as externally (with corporate) among the American-Indians of the Navajo nation situated on these lands.

Ross also takes a useful look at the alternative bottom-up options of sustainability. Rainwater harvesting, community gardening, open markets, guerrilla farming and a federally funded irrigation project in the Gila River reservation are all discussed as ways of promoting social and ecological sustainability. Throughout the book there runs a strong social message: that sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing the problems of and learning from the grassroots – from indigenous populations – even, and this would generate ripples of shock among Republican senators, from minority and ethnic immigrants.

Written in clear and accessible style, this book has a reach far beyond academic audiences and will appeal to those without any specialist knowledge on the topic. It is not burdened by jargon or lengthy theoretical reflections and in many ways it reads like an engaging piece of journalism. Yet it is far more sophisticated than journalist reporting. Behind the enthralling story of Phoenix's road to environmental suicide, lies a meticulously researched piece of scholarly work. And this book is also radical and activist in its approach: bold in its exposure of the limits of general knowledge among politicians and so-called experts, made terrifying when combined with dogmas around class and racial privilege.

The message of this book is simple: that sustainability is not achieved through technological fixes – a point that those in the White House and Downing Street should take note of. Ross illustrates this message brilliantly throughout the book, by looking at a number of examples of sustainable practices and livelihoods counter to the neo-liberal practices of the Arizona state.

Yet perhaps this is the only potential weakness of this book in that it echoes current definitions of sustainability as social, economic and environmental – popularised by the [Brundtland Report](#), the 1987 UN report on sustainable development. It does not actually pose the biggest question: how do we make this triadic nature of sustainability work for future generations? How do we translate small bottom-up projects of community gardens into mainstream policy and regulation? How do we change from unsustainable lifestyles to more ethically responsible ones? How do we ensure that these small efforts by minority, indigenous, and eco-warrior communities are replicated by those at the highest level of the social strata – the middle and upper classes who do not want to ditch their SUVs, suburban homes and the extensive system of freeways? In short, how do we create a sustainable American Dream? Finally and most importantly, do we not need to rethink this triad of social, economic and environmental sustainability itself in order to find more creative solutions beyond the system of GDP and growth models, which use employment generation (hence social sustainability) as their *raison d'être*? These are big questions and should not detract from the brilliant book, but unless these questions are addressed we will only be left finding 'examples' of sustainable initiatives among minority and indigenous populations.

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eco-cities, material geographies of home; home, migration and the city; and participatory visual methodologies. [Read more reviews by Ayona.](#)

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