

A photograph of Jeffrey Sachs, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit, light blue shirt, and red tie. He is seated at a round wooden table, looking down at a book titled 'COMMON WEALTH' by Jeffrey Sachs. On the table is a green wooden tray filled with green and red apples. A pair of glasses and a small white object are also on the table. The background is a wooden bookshelf filled with books and binders, including one labeled 'FOREIGN OPERATIONS'.

SHAKING THE INVISIBLE HAND

jeffrey sachs sustains
world interest

BY GIZEM ORBEY
PHOTOS BY MOLLY CROSSIN

Jeffrey Sachs thinks it's about time the study of economics—and the U.S. government, for that matter—gets a makeover. “I’ve been trying to suggest that economics itself needs to expand its vision considerably if it’s going to be useful,” he explained when he sat down with *The Eye* to discuss the ultimately hopeful message of his new book, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*. Though the book looks to the future, it can also help us deconstruct misconceptions of the past—not just about our approach to sustainable development but about the man behind the term.

Sachs’ well-received first book, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*, was called a “landmark” by *Publishers Weekly* and focused on the one billion people left behind by the market forces that make the rest of the world go ’round. The 2005 release featured a foreword by Bono and outlined nine economic and political steps developed by Sachs, in conjunction with Kofi Annan and the United Nations, to help the world’s poorest countries out of this “poverty trap.” In contrast, *Common Wealth* focuses more on the general issues that profit-driven market forces leave behind—such as the development of sustainable technologies and environmental conservation—and proves once again how startlingly little rich countries such as the U.S. would have to invest to look after the environmental and humanitarian problems that we all share and that the invisible hand can’t fix on its own.

For those craving a shotgun ride through Africa with Sachs at the wheel, *Common Wealth* will be a bit of a disappointment. Stylistically, it is more pragmatic than *The End of Poverty*, bereft of the vivid descriptions of his fieldwork in places like Malawi that illuminated the first book. But what it lacks anecdotally, *Common Wealth* more than makes up for with unrelenting, eloquent prose that analyzes the U.S.’s current state of affairs—this time without the polite regard for political correctness you might expect from Sachs—and bold, clearly delineated arguments. At 345 pages, 50 fewer than *The End of Poverty*, it also has a more digestible length. In short, *Common Wealth* is less Literature Humanities, more Contemporary Civilization. Indeed, it is impossible to read this remarkably comprehensive book without comparing Sachs to the likes of Adam Smith, whom Sachs admires as “the first champion of economics literature.” The influence of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* is strongly felt throughout the text.

“That is what literature really means, great literature,” Sachs says, considering Smith’s work. It is 8 a.m. on a Monday, and Sachs’ office at the Earth Institute is already buzzing with energy, a belly of activity in the great slumbering beast that is Low Library. To Columbia students, Sachs is more than a professor—from this veritable Fortress of Solitude, he is our superhero-in-residence, an economics nerd with stage presence, just as adept at drawing up financial solutions to the world’s problems as he is at fielding questions about whether he keeps a pad of paper and a pen on his nightstand in case he comes up with “The Answer” in his sleep (he does). But although it is his key role as a mouthpiece for sustainable development that partners him with celebrities and tends to get more press, he is first and foremost an economist, and as an



author, the complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory economic problems of our society are what he wants his readers to understand.

“The world is facing enormous ecological and environmental problems,” he writes in *Common Wealth*. “But running out of natural resources is not the right way to describe the threat.” His book explains, for example, the economics of why the gap between the rich and the poor is growing—even as humanity is getting richer in terms of income per person—in a trend called “convergence.” Most important, where it goes furthest out on a limb, *Common Wealth* manages more successfully than other works have to convince the reader that humanity shares a “common fate on a crowded planet.” In outlining the progress of nations over time, Sachs makes a strong argument

that we are entering a new global stage of history. He makes it seem not unrealistic that just as certain industrializing nations collapsed in the 19th century, depending on how soon they “began to understand that they could not simply leave their own poor to wallow in deprivation, disease, and hunger without courting crime, instability, and disease for all,” we could all fail, together, if we do not mobilize our resources to save each other.

The book’s signature assertion is that the “activist philosophy, which holds that the self-organizing forces of a market economy should be guided by overarching principles of social justice and environmental stewardship, has not yet been extended robustly to a global society.” *Common Wealth* is a pioneer in making that crucial extension—and in this respect,

reading it feels kind of like doing your CC homework, except that the issues are current. They are the defining issues our generation will face, and in that respect you'll know you can do more with what you learn from *Common Wealth* than impress someone at a cocktail party. Before you read it, though, Sachs wants to clarify something about its title. "Remember that my main theme here is not redistribution," he says. "In fact, I don't talk too much about rich countries redistributing income to middle-income countries or even to poor countries, I talk about how to invest effectively in the future."

"I'm not an egalitarian," he stresses. "I believe we should help the poor. I believe that we don't need to have in our society poor people the way that we do."

On March 11, Zhang Weiqing, China's minister of the State Population and Family Planning Commission, reported to the *New York Times* that China would not be reversing its one-child policy for at least another decade, ending recent speculation that adjustments would be made in response to the AP-reported "forced abortions, sterilizations, and dangerously imbalanced sex ratio" resulting from the legislation. Sachs' attitude toward these claims is that China did what it had to do. "A tremendous decline in fertility rates was very important for China," he says. "But the whole two chapters [in *Common Wealth*] on demography emphasize that this kind of fertility reduction can be achieved voluntarily, I believe." Indeed, of the three parts that compose the middle bulk of *Common Wealth*—"Environmental Sustainability," "The Demographic Challenge," and "Prosperity for All," characterizing the three problems at hand—the section on demography is the best expounded, the most revolutionary, and will likely be the most inter-

esting to readers already familiar with the sections on the environment and poverty. "I felt that it was important to lay out the problems, give the scale of the challenge that our generation sees and then talk about how foreign policy, global cooperation, and individual action can address these things," Sachs says, referring to the structure of the book. Prescriptive writing is mostly reserved for part five, "Global Problem Solving." "There are hints of solutions along the way, or more than hints," he says, recognizing a possible frustration readers might feel. "But I tried to put all the pieces together towards the end." After a pause, he laughs, "I hope people get there."

Even if they don't, the diagnostic middle portions of the book are fundamental. Population control is paramount according to Sachs, but he clarifies that if it is going to be achieved safely and voluntarily, as he maintains, it can only be done through "a lot of focus and public policy."

"That's really what I'm advocating everywhere," he says. "That we take this up, stop hiding it. Our government doesn't even talk about it anymore because of its politics, and that is a huge mistake." He adds, "This issue needs to come to the fore again."

Though he doesn't express explicit support for any one presidential candidate when he addresses the mistakes of our government in *Common Wealth*, Sachs' repeated allusions to the successes of John F. Kennedy—in particular his quoting of Kennedy's famous Peace Address at American University in 1963—makes one thing clear: as Americans, we need a paradigm shift. We need "to

believe in the very possibility of cooperation with a seemingly implacable enemy," and we need a president who will lead the way in this respect, much as Kennedy helped diffuse an impending catastrophe in the U.S.'s relations with the Soviet Union. With the timing of *Common Wealth*'s release, Sachs in a sense capitalizes on his own historical context—after all, in the swing of the presidential primaries, when we have a woman and a black man as two of the leading candidates, can there be a better time to advocate for hopeful change? In a section called "Six Trends That Will Shape This Century," Sachs writes in a confident, almost prophetic tone. The first trend, "The Age of Convergence," highlights the need for effective communication between cultures, which even further necessitates the nomination of the right sort of political leaders. It is "when markets don't effectively address" the problems of society, Sachs explains, that we need to explore "what can be done in terms of public policy."

Unlike Adam Smith, Sachs can do more than write about the changes he thinks our government needs—he can actually affect change in his position as a political advisor, and this is exactly what he does. "One of the things that I'll strongly recommend to the candidates is a new department for international sustainable development," he says. "It's not enough to have a presidential science advi-

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sor." Sachs feels that while in the future candidates should "certainly have some more knowledge of science and engineering," and that "even some formal training would be helpful," he thinks the main solution lies in "reorganizing our government."

"I've written a report on that recently, when I was a member of a Congressional commission on our development aid," Sachs says. "I said that we need a whole new department which brings together expertise and which is able to absorb this kind of information, because we don't have that right now." Just as *Common Wealth* doesn't hold back on its critique of the government, Sachs in person is blunt. "I see our government acting blindly," he says. "It has very little sense of other societies and the challenges that they're facing. It can't grapple with problem-solving in the areas of demography and climate change and so on, not only because the will isn't there, but also because the means simply are not there right now."

Sachs is no stranger to finding himself on the receiving end of critique. Though *Time* has twice named him one of its "Top 100 Most Influential People," and Angelina Jolie probably has one of those "Jeff Sachs is My Homeboy" PoverTees in her closet, plenty of sources have voiced opposition to Sachs' methods and beliefs. The *New York Times* literary supplement called *The End of Poverty*'s financial solutions "single-minded," and Sachs' number-one critic is an economist himself—William Easterly of New York University, currently on sabbatical at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. Easterly included an extensive critique of Sachs

in his 2006 book *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. In the book, Easterly argues that "nobody can fully grasp the complexity of the political, social, technological, ecological and economic systems that underlie poverty" and draws attention to what he calls the "arrogance that 'we' know how to fix 'them.'" Most specifically, Easterly argues that "large-scale crash programs, especially by outsiders, often produce unintended consequences," and, citing Sachs' apparent dearth of strategies for accountability, claims that often "simple dreams at the top run afoul of insufficient knowledge of the complex realities at the bottom."

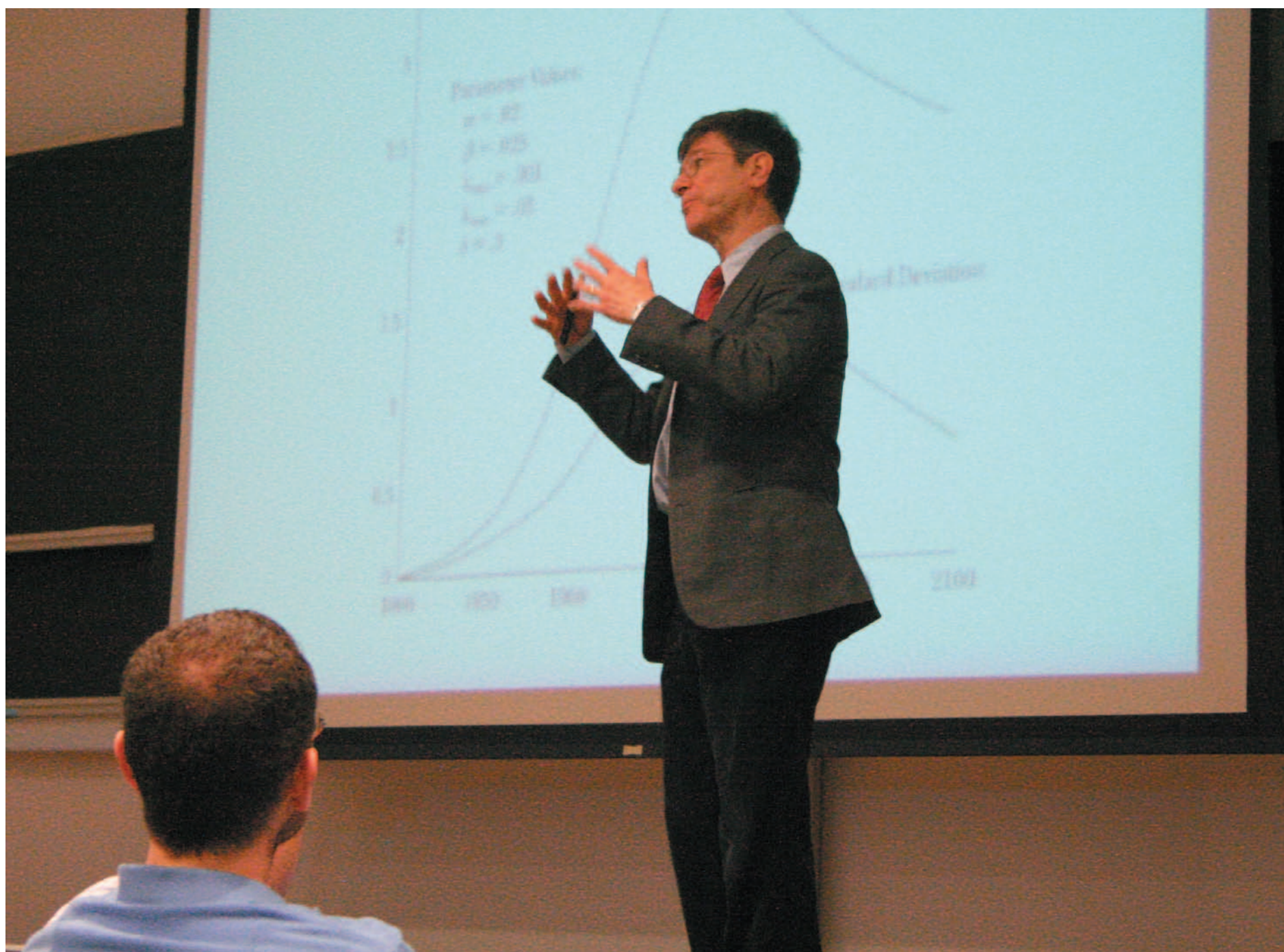
In a recent e-mail responding to *The Eye*'s question about which issues he hoped Sachs' new book would resolve, Easterly writes: "I read the new book. I was disappointed that Sachs seems to be moving even further away from common sense and good economics." While he felt that Sachs' 2005 solution to poverty was "an ineffective plan by the ineffective U.N., and lots of money [was] spent without anyone being held accountable," Easterly writes that with *Common Wealth*, Sachs "applies the same approach to all the world's remaining problems ... while he restates unchanged his failed approach to global poverty."

When it comes to the issue of accountability, responses to various aspects of Sachs' Millennium Villages project have swung back and forth like an

ugly game of snap. In the January issue of *Scientific American* magazine, right below Sachs' running column titled "Sustainable Developments," an editorial by a young aid worker named Eva Kaplan argued for more accountability in the campaign to supply bed nets to combat malaria in sub-Saha-

ran Africa, claiming, "There is anecdotal evidence that some people have employed the nets as wedding veils or fishing aids." Meanwhile, Mark Grabowsky's Feb. 28 cover story in the journal *Nature* provided data that supports the Millennium Villages project, saying that the "new tools and strategies made possible by the substantial increase in resources over the past ten years" mean "hope is arriving in Africa." In response to Kaplan's piece, Sachs says that "the article was all wrong in my view, and seriously deficient in information. The fact of the matter is we're on the verge of a tremendous breakthrough in malaria control. It's already showing up in many places and it's exactly based on the kind of approach that I've been advocating for nearly a decade now." Sachs speaks of the campaign against malaria with a giddiness that reveals how much the project means to him. "It's going to be scaled up even faster now, and it's going to be hugely successful," he says.

Easterly is correct in suggesting that Sachs follows a similar path in *Common Wealth* to the one in his first book. But the criticisms that paint Sachs as a sort of indiscriminate benefactor or denigrate his primarily financial approach to global problems seem to miss a key point. It is important to remember that, appearances and celebrity endorsements aside, Sachs is not a superhero after all—he is an economist, and we should ask ourselves to what extent we can expect him to come up with the plans to finance solutions, implement them, and then also analyze the plans himself. Furthermore, his primarily financial approach to global problems can be



thought of as a pragmatic first-things-first stragem. Just as a willingness to help other countries, even if it were to be found in our current administration, would do little good so long as we lack the means to understand how we can help in the first place, all the accountability plans in the world can have no effect so long as the initial funding to supply the means to implement solutions is missing. “I’m an economist,” Sachs says, “so I suppose that my role in all this is to try to understand as best I can what the other disciplines are telling us about these challenges” and to “come up with practical financing approaches.” He explains, “My professional training allows me to add specifically one key part of this, and that is resource mobilization.”

In this sense, the holistic approach of *Common Wealth* doesn’t compromise Sachs’ role as an economist. Rather, it calls for “a new clinical approach to sustainable development”—much like a doctor considers the health of the whole body in properly diagnosing a disease although the treatment options remain the same. Financing is Sachs’ usual prescription, along with “new methods of training the next generation of development leaders”—us. Indeed, Sachs’ awareness of the need to mitigate boundaries between “reductionist” and “integrative” science is apparent in the work he does here at Columbia. “Because a lot of the specialty training is the norm at a university,” he says, “what I’ve been trying to do here with colleagues is actually mainly introduce the interdisciplinary training at Columbia.” Toward this end, a sustainable development undergraduate major and a Ph.D. program have both been

developed for the University. Sachs and his colleagues are now “looking to introduce a Master’s degree” in the discipline as well. The new student journal on sustainable development, *Consilience*, launched just before spring break. For interested students who don’t have time to take classes in the department, the Earth Institute also sponsors several interdisciplinary events each week and has hosted speakers such as Cornell agriculturalist John Duxbury and Human Genome Project director Francis Collins. This upcoming weekend it will hold a symposium in the Low Rotunda titled, “Neurosciences and Free Will.”

On Jan. 28, many students skipped their evening classes to attend an over-registered Earth Institute event called Show Me: The Poverty Action Tour featuring Sachs and crooner-turned-Show-Me-Campaign-founder John Legend. At the event, one undergraduate stepped up to the microphone to ask Legend why we should care about helping the poor in the first place—and elicited what was probably not the hoped-for response. Legend gave a pragmatic justification—citing our common fate and the problems that will wind up on our own doorsteps some day—not a moral one. When pressed for information on whether or not he believes in a universal moral law himself, Sachs gives a similar answer. “I don’t believe it’s easy to claim a universal moral law in a way that everybody is going to accept that law, and find the same meaning of such a law from a proof of moral theory or from a single religious tradition,” he says. Instead, he offers, “This kind of practical approach is helpful, actually—because it doesn’t assert that these moral laws come from out-

side commandments. It asserts that if we think hard about our place in the world, what we would like for our children, what we would like for ourselves in fair play, we can reach a lot of agreement, and people can locate that agreement in their own cultural traditions but not insist that that’s the origin of them.”

This practical, open-minded approach, which hinges on keeping a positive outlook about the prospect of global cooperation, is what Sachs advocates above all. And in that way, he shows how each of us, regardless of our majors, can contribute to a sustainable future starting today. In *Common Wealth*, quoting Kennedy, he insists that our progress will depend “not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.”

“We should be taxing ourselves more and spending more on education, health, and other forms of social protection,” he says. “I think that the evidence that I present in the book is quite overwhelming: that we would have a very productive society and a far safer and fairer society if we did that.” The key, he maintains, is “not to give up our market economy, not to give up our innovation—but also not to believe that we have to have massive amounts of poor people as the cost of progress in America.”

“It’s a widespread belief in this country, and I don’t believe in it at all,” he says. “One of the chapters [of *Common Wealth*] is wholly devoted to showing that that is not the case.” Whether *Common Wealth* will be read a century from now as a nation’s swan song or as a harbinger of positive social change is up to us. \\\