More Wood for the Fire

Capitalist Solutions for Global Warming

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While some people were shocked when Obama revealed himself to be an energy policy rightwinger in his State of the Union address, advocating more oil drilling, more nuclear power, and uttering that egregious Bush-era term, "clean coal," I think the most remarkable aspect of this portion of his speech was that a politician had uttered the plain and obvious truth about the future.

While progressives typically wear the mask of green capitalism and conservatives the mask of the free market, the difference in the results of policies either camp would enact really only comes down to how fast renewable energy production would develop in comparison to conventional energy production. If the conservatives have their way, renewables will develop slowly, as government subsidies, what they unironically call the free market, all favor nuclear, coal, and oil. On the other hand, the progressives would speed up development by subsidizing renewables and taxing non-renewables.

The conservative strategy would inarguably doom most of the planet's species and many millions of its people to extinction, as they are mistaking carbon reduction for energy independence, and treating the problem as some conflict or competition between nation-states. Obama, evidently, has joined their ranks, advocating nothing more than that America become a global leader in energy production and innovation.

Progressives who advocate solutions to climate change within the framework of the existing system seek to establish renewable energy production as a replacement for, not an addition to, existing fossil fuel-based energy production. They point out, not incorrectly, that enough solar energy falls on the planet earth to power our behemoth global economy into the future. Their equations all seem to be correct and uncontested, regarding the total amount of solar radiation, the efficiency of affordable solar cells, the cost and land space required to produce US electricity needs. There's one little thing they are forgetting.

Because of the way capitalism works and the way ecosystems work, there are no supply-based solutions to climate change.

To understand this, let's take a step back and plumb the depths of the abyss our political and business leaders have brought us to the brink of. First of all, climate change is not a danger of the future. It is already happening. Storms, droughts, floods, and desertification are already becoming more intense, malaria and other tropical diseases are already extending north and south, species

and habitats are already dying out at an alarming rate. Even according to such establishment figures as Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the UN, 300,000 people are dying every year, right now, due to the more easily measured effects of climate change—heat waves, floods, and forest fires. Many more deaths are caused by the greater spread of tropical diseases, crop failure caused by multiple factors, and food shortages as Global South grains go to biofuel production for cars in the Global North.

If the proportion of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere continues to rise, warming will trigger a number of natural feedback loops that will cause the average global temperature to jump to at least 5C of warming by the end of the century. These feedback loops include the diminishing of the polar icecaps, which currently reflect a large amount of solar radiation, the warming of the oceans, causing carbon dioxide currently dissolved in sea water to be released into the atmosphere, and the release of massive methane deposits trapped beneath permafrost in the northern hemisphere.

Also around the end of the century, the world population is projected to peak at 9 billion. The grains that currently feed the world are nearly all cultivated in temperate climates. As the world warms, global agricultural productivity drops, and large swaths of land are rendered unsuitable for cultivation. The result would be mass starvation—scientists predict that between 3 and 6 billion could die. Meanwhile, there would be a bigger wave of global extinctions than when the dinosaurs died out. And this isn't even the worst case scenario.

To stop this from happening, we need to halt the increase in greenhouse gases as soon as possible. Scientists have not reached a consensus on how many parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide is safe: those closer to industry and governments, of course, suggest a higher number, whereas more independent scientists suggest a lower number. Seeing as how people and species are already dying from climate change, what does that say about those who are talking of a safe limit as something we have not yet exceeded?

Establishment scientists suggest a cost-benefit analysis for dealing with climate change. Those government-funded humanitarians at UCSD say that finding an appropriate solution "depends on how we judge, as a global community… the economic costs compared to the risks," and this kind of thinking is pretty standard. After all, those 3 to 6 billion people who might starve to death nearly all live in the Global South, in the (neo)colonized regions of the world, so the technocrats are in true form to speak of "acceptable costs."

This is nothing less than climate brinksmanship. The world's powerful and their labcoat-wearing lackeys are engaged in an old, old war with Mother Earth and they want to see how far they can push her before she pushes back, how close to this safe limit of greenhouse gases they can tread. If they go too far, they will not be the ones to bear the gravest consequences.

And can we really expect any less of them? After all, we're talking about the same institutions, run by the direct successors of the same people who toyed with the fate of the world in the same way during the Cold War, knowing full well that they had their nuclear bunkers to run off to. It was only by good luck that they did not annihilate all of us in a nuclear holocaust. They won that little game, so now they are up for another spin of the wheel.

But this time no one has to press their finger down on a little button to begin the apocalypse. What is required, rather, is that we all keep punching our time clocks and allowing this unstoppable machine to move forward. Inertia itself will seal our fate.

Capitalism will develop new and better forms of renewable energy production, I have no doubt about that. But it doesn't matter. What is required to stave off mass extinction is to stop green-

house gas emissions before it is too late. However, because of the short-term feedbacks inherent to capitalism and its inability to appreciate non-monetary costs to the environment, alternative energy sources will be just that—alternatives, not replacements. Solar-produced electricity would require massive government subsidies to be cost-competitive with coal on a national or international scale, yet what we need is not more solar, but less coal. As much as possible of the fossil fuels that are still in the ground need to stay there, forever.

But capitalism simply has no mechanism for barring profitable forms of production or upholding any kind of taboo that prevents anything under the sun from being converted into a resource and a commodity. And it brooks no such mechanism either. Take the most abhorrent business practice you can imagine. Is it slavery? There are more slaves involved in the production of primary commodities today than there were during the height of the Triangular Trade. For the most part, the compelled labor simply has to take place in countries with weaker regulations, while institutions based in the wealthy countries, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO), work to ensure that regulations in those countries remain weak. Or maybe animal testing is the most gruesome, in your eyes? One doesn't even need to go to the Global South to find companies making a pretty penny off that practice.

What Obama outlined in his State of the Union address is exactly what is going to happen—continued extraction of oil, coal, and nuclear fuels, alongside increased use of renewables. In other words, wind and solar power will contribute to an expansion of total energy production, followed by an increase in energy consumption. A similar thing happened in the 80s, when reformist environmentalists were advocating greater energy efficiency to save the planet from the problems of energy production. What they did not count on was that under capitalism, greater energy efficiency can lead to lower energy costs, which leads to a net increase in energy consumption. In other words, those environmentalists who hoped to find a solution within the confines of the system are partially responsible for the mess we're in now, and the fact that we have less time to deal with it.

The few people who were talking about pollution, ecological collapse, and related issues thirty years ago—generally radical ecologists, anarchists, and indigenous communities—were ignored or dismissed as crazy. Nowadays, they have no time to say "I told you so," because members of those three groups are investigated as terrorists and locked up in prison. The biggest FBI domestic anti-terror investigation in the US in 2003, measured by the number of wiretaps used, was against an aboveground animal rights group that ran a website to publicize direct actions against an animal testing company. I myself was named in Virginia's 2009 Terrorism Threat Assessment, just for writing a book against reformism and pacifism in social struggles, and for being an anarchist activist. Other anarchists have been sentenced to up to 22 years in prison for environmental direct actions that harmed no one. The post 9-11 farce of National Security has been used as a pretext to increase policing and forced relocations against Native American nations that straddle the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders. And whose lands do we suppose will be taken for the millions of acres of solar panels that need to be built to supply domestic electricity needs? And then there's all the mining that will be required for making so many photovoltaic cells. Whom do we suppose will be worst affected by the pollution?

It would be unconscionable to allow the world leaders who just five and ten years ago were denying the reality of climate change to be entrusted with solving the problem today, especially when they are the ones who profit from the current social and industrial arrangements, while

the many people who forced the world to acknowledge the problem, sometimes giving their own lives in the struggle, continue to be silenced and repressed.

I was actually happy that the COP15 climate talks in Denmark last December resulted in such a hollow and insufficient proposal, because it may help people realize that world leaders are not the ones who will protect us from climate change. For me, the greatest failing in Copenhagen was that the temporary police state erected to ensure security during the talks successfully utilized mass arrests to prevent the thousands of protestors from causing havoc and disrupting the summit, as previous summits have been partially or fully disrupted in Heiligendamm, Seattle, and elsewhere.

This is an important defeat because part of the true solution to climate change lies in throwing a wrench in the gears of the global institutions that currently monopolize the solving of this problem. A riot in the streets impedes the ability of the world leaders to discuss, to hobnob, and to present their plans to a passive public, and it makes social conflicts visible, it shows that the elite monopoly on decision-making is hotly contested and only exists by being forcefully imposed. In this context, disruption is above all a constructive act.

Anthropologist David Graeber showed how the decentralized networks of the antiglobalization movement succeeded in their mid-range goals, sabotaging neoliberal institutions like the IMF and WTO, by disrupting their summits, delegitimizing their policies, and building horizontal, prefigurative networks of global communication. Once their legitimacy and monopoly on decision-making were challenged, internal contradictions between rich and poor member states came to the surface, and these institutions became largely unworkable. The WTO failed to overcome internal divisions, and the IMF, once an important global creditor, itself had to be bailed out.

The high degree of regulations, taxes, and subsidies that will necessarily be part of elite responses to climate change bring the governments of nation-states back into a central role that they often did not have amidst the deregulations of Bretton Woods neoliberalism. Yet governments cannot prevent ecological collapse, and no current government of any influence is even trying. The progressive states of Europe proposed a mere 20-30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, to be accomplished primarily by the cheap disappearing act of carbon offset trading. The lack of governmental solutions only makes sense, because governments exist first and foremost to build and maintain the infrastructure necessary for commerce, to secure new markets for producers, and to protect the haves from the have-nots. Lately, new technologies have allowed them to approach their age-old dream of total social control, and this project makes them even less amenable to the idea of listening to activists or the idea of a natural environment that must be respected rather than controlled.

Governments rule, however, not by monopolizing force, but by monopolizing decision-making, by seizing the central ground of society and making themselves the arbiter of social conflicts and the implementer of solutions. Rejecting the solutions of world leaders, refusing to dialogue with powerful institutions, in fact trying to disrupt them, is a crucial part of our fight to save our place on this planet.

Those who think world leaders can be persuaded to adopt adequate responses to climate change, the environmental NGOs that sit down at the table in these climate summits, are mistaken. Other writers have amply demonstrated how the reformist climate justice movement is generating false solutions that will only make things worse (e.g. Tim Simons and Ali Tonak, "The Dead End of Climate Justice"). And environmental activists at the frontlines of the struggle against coal mining in Appalachia or deforestation in the Pacific Northwest remember how

the big NGOs, standing on the backs of their sacrifices, betrayed the grassroots and rushed to Congress at the first chance to endorse and take credit for big legislation that only slowed the devastation.

Just as the earth is a holistic, interconnected system, piecemeal approaches to climate change are doomed to failure. Relevant factors that will determine the survival or extinction of species and peoples include forestation, soil health, fertilizer-caused dead zones in the ocean, integrity of habitats, population growth, forms of agriculture, and a hundred other things that are not being addressed by world leaders. Greatly boosting solar energy production would indeed require government subsidies and corporate investments, but this will not avert the ecological catastrophe that has already begun. To keep fossil fuels in the ground, check overpopulation, and protect and restore habitats, we will need to do nothing short of changing who holds power in our society, and how decisions are made; to change the way our culture views the planet, from seeing it as a dead thing that can be exploited and toyed with, to understanding it as an interconnected, living system on which we are dependent for our survival.

A popular solution to climate change will require a decentralization of economy and decision-making, the same decentralization prefigured by the global horizontal networks currently fighting back against those who are responsible for climate change. Our standard of living must be based on available local resources and not what can be purchased on the world market. Forms of food production like permaculture and local, organic gardening, developments that are already gaining global steam at the grassroots, can feed the world without the unacceptable human and environmental costs of industrial agribusiness. As for population, anthropologists have shown that local, pre-colonial forms of fertility control lost their effectiveness as decision-making, society, and identity went from the local to the national scale. We can and must reverse this process.

In 2009, Elinor Olstrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics for proving what anarchist scientist Peter Kropotkin demonstrated in his 1902 book, Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution, that common resources can be horizontally managed by the people who use them, without government regulation or privatization. In other words, the commons, which have been progressively stolen from us over the last 500 years by the very institutional predecessors of those who govern us now, are ours for the taking.

Climate change is already killing people and driving entire species to extinction every day. We can accept more of the same by trusting in the solutions of world leaders we know are lying to us, or we can take things into our own hands, and build solutions at the grassroots level while networking with other communities in resistance at the global level, and sabotaging the efforts of the powerful to manage and prolong the disaster they have created.

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