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Shaking Off Capitalism for Ecological Civilization

Solon

In early sixth century BCE Athens, a few rich landowners enslaved those of the rural people who could not pay back their debts. In fact, they went further. They started selling their fellow indebted Greeks to foreigners. Athens and rural Attica were on the verge of civil war.

Cooler heads prevailed and powerful Athenian politicians invited Solon back to rule. He had served as archon, chief political leader of Athens. He was a poet who praised eunomia, good order and government. He had the reputation for honesty and justice.

Once an archon for the second time in 594-593 BCE, Solon forgave the farmers' debts and mortgages, bringing an end to serfdom and slavery. He purchased back those Athenians who had been sold to foreigners.

In his Constitution of Athens (12.4-5), Aristotle quotes Solon saying he removed "the many boundary stones of bondage piercing everywhere the black Earth of Attica." Solon also freed Athenians who were forced to "shameful servitude, trembling before their masters."

Solon did all that without siding with the poor or the rich. "The common people," he said, "enjoy things now they would not have in their wildest dreams. And the privileged and powerful would do well to think of me as their friend."

Aristotle describes Solon's initiative as seisachtheia, the shaking off of burdens. He was a great lawgiver who paved the road of Athens for democracy.

Solon remains paradigmatic of the importance of justice and the rule of law. Monsters of wealth and power often tyrannized the Greeks as they tyrannize us today.

Serfdom and slavery are logical byproducts of the politics of theocracies, oligarchies of capitalist or communist varieties, plutocracies, monarchies and empires.

Reporters are under the delusion slavery was really abolished after the Civil War. In addition, our modern age is bragging it's "better" than previous eras.

We and our ancestors

We no longer have state-sanctioned slavery, though workers have become the slaves we rent. We no longer have religious inquisitions and, officially, no longer fight religious wars. We also use the rudiments of science to avoid plagues and fight symptoms of disease.

In addition, we employ science for making money, corrupting it for the production of weapons, genetically engineered crops, pesticides, agribusiness food and the panoply of the industrialization of the world.

Our modern civilization has been under the shadow of violence and death because we never learned from the experience of Athens and Solon.

Bankers and governments and people with lots of money are renting money, indebting many of the borrowers to savage conditions.

Capitalism

The owners or possessors of money or other property are owners of capital. They use this capital for all human activities, including paying medical doctors, drilling for oil and coal, funding colleges and universities, farming, building skyscrapers and highways, buying food, manufacture, scientific research, running armies and fighting wars.

In fact, money in 2019 runs civilization, eclipsing the virtues of justice, law, friendship, love, beauty, and appreciation and protection of the natural world. Economists, business schools, corporations and business the world over have deified money. People with talent become human capital. Greed is good.

Yet large-scale capitalism has practically never showed much respect for the integrity of people and the natural world for the simple reason the owners of capital use and exploit people and the environment for enrichment.

The factories of industrialized and industrializing societies have been turning the world upside down, poisoning millions of humans to premature death. Capitalists have been turning villages and small towns to gigantic factories manufacturing everything, including food.

Industrialists have been excavating the planet, both its surface and waters: logging forests, dredging swamps, wetlands, lakes, rivers and land for minerals, including silver, gold, coal, petroleum and natural gas; in West Virginia, for instance, they have been blowing up and mining mountains for coal; and agribusiness men have been mining farmland for crops and the feeding of cattle for slaughter.

Capitalist enterprises have been synthesizing thousands of chemicals and drugs. They have been fishing and over-fishing the oceans with technologies of mining. They even built almighty atomic and nuclear weapons, which could bring life to an end.

These technologies of capitalism changed the world for ever.

The effects of industrializing the world have been bad enough for people. But they have been cataclysmic for wildlife. The extinction of species is going through the roof – up to a million species may be at risk. Humans have become a plague-like factor for the planet. Animals and plants disappear at rates hundreds of times faster than those before the nineteenth century.

Humans have been responsible for this awful disappearance of species. Additional loss of countless animals is also tied to humans – in agriculture, hunting and endless economic growth and development. Capitalists take away the space and food animals need to exist and thrive. Capitalism is ecocidal.

Deleterious capitalism: The shift to pesticides

Converting a forest to a farm is a holocaust for the creatures that lived in the forest. Cultivating the land that used to be a forest brings more danger to myriads of birds, insects and small animals because the farmer sprays the land with dozens of highly poisonous chemical pesticides.

Pesticides are synthetic chemicals that are a legacy of chemical warfare. This connection to war makes them unsuitable for farming.

Second, the alliance of agribusiness and politicians have brought into being so much pro-pesticides corruption that laboratories usually employ fraud in “testing” farm sprays. The owners of pesticides “test” their own products.

Third, pesticides are designed to kill “pests.” But what is a pest? Who has the right to classify insects or birds as pests? Honeybees are insects. Are honeybees pests? And who is to say that, if we accept such arbitrary interference in nature, we will not also be classified as pests?

Nevertheless, capitalist farmers agreed chemical warfare was necessary to “produce” vast amounts of food on huge acreage. So, the chemists of agricultural universities and agribusiness designed pesticides killing on contact and through food.

Some of pesticides are neurotoxins that are lethal to all life, insects in particular, including honeybees and other pollinators. In addition, nerve poisons are deleterious to insect-feeding birds.

Moreover, pesticides are absorbed by crops, fruits, and vegetables. And since they are deleterious to insects and birds, they are equally deleterious to humans eating sprayed food. Of course, the amount of sprayed toxins reaching food is miniscule. But the impact of the sprayed chemicals in the body is cumulative. Mixed chemicals potentiate each other as well.

Nevertheless, sprayed food rarely kills people outright. What it does is undermining health, slowly over years and decades. Once pesticides are in the human body, they disrupt hormones and store themselves in the fatty tissues.

If the person keeps eating sprayed food, eventually the toxic harm becomes cancer or neurological disease affecting the brain, eyesight, hearing, ability to speak clearly, and compromising severely understanding and learning.

This fact alone should have sufficed in never allowing such poisons on the food Americans eat. In the early 1980s, the EPA had evidence for the brain-damaging effects of neurotoxic pesticides, but did nothing because of the “deregulatory” policies of the Reagan administration.

The deregulation schemes of the Reagan, Bush, and Trump administrations and the nearly do-nothing policies of the Clinton and Obama administrations are symptoms of the inherent corrupt nature of capitalism. It is blind and deaf to human and ecological suffering and death. It has shaped the scientific and academic community and the EPA to put their stamp of approval on hazardous, nay potentially poisonous, food as safe food.

Rising ecology? The paradigm of Rachel Carson

A courageous biologist by the name of Rachel Carson warned Americans about deleterious chemical pesticides: their killing of birds. Millions of Americans read her timely 1962 book, “Silent Spring.”

Unfortunately, not much came out of Carson’s probing and informative book. The industry pulled all stops in defaming Carson and disrupting government policies for the protection of human and environmental health. The millions of Americans who had read and continue to read Carson’s book have been largely silent.

Meanwhile, reporters must have been aware of the dramatic impact of pesticides and, correspondingly, the failure of the millions of Carson followers to do something about the vision of their idol. But instead of action, some of them started praising Carson to heavens, as if such paeans would hide the fact most of the Carson environmentalists have never been mad as hell. They did not take a united stand against polluters.

Hagiography does not honor Carson. We know she was good in what she did. She combed the scientific literature and threw light on chemical sprays cooked to hook the country on useless and dangerous bird-killing practices. Carson would probably have insisted environmentalists fight for the abolition of most pesticides.

In 1972, eight years after the death of Carson from breast cancer in 1964, EPA banned DDT. This was a heavy-weight among poisons. In the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, DDT was the undisputed magic bullet against malaria mosquitoes, insects and everything else farmers and pest controllers did not like.

Knocking down the king of sprays cost EPA dearly. Just like in the case of Carson, the chemical and agribusiness industries turned their guns against EPA, accusing it for overreach, bad science, and interfering with the rights of farmers to do as they pleased. They promised to each other this would never happen again. It didn't. EPA was defanged. Capitalism triumphed at a tremendous price to human and planetary health.

Capitalist denial: climate change

The story of global warming is similar to that of pesticides. The two stories are complementary. Pesticides and industrialized farming fueled by pesticides constitute a major source of warming the planet.

Just like agrichemical corporations have been defending pesticides, powerful fossil fuel companies do the same for coal, petroleum and natural gas. They squashed efforts to abandon their money-in-the-bank for solar and wind energy. They documented the catastrophic effects of the burning of oil, coal, and natural gas. But they kept those secrets to themselves. Instead, they have been funding misleading studies spreading doubt about the science of climate change.

Meanwhile, the warmer planet is wrecking both human communities and wildlife. Decrying the timidity of their elders, children are taking on the cause of defending the planet.

Melting ice wipes out food for large animals, including birds. Sea birds like puffins, for example, are starving to death in the millions per year. Julia Parrish, professor of fisheries at the University of Washington, says, "The ocean is screaming."

Defending civilization

So, what do we do with large-scale capitalism, the economic and political monster responsible for this ecumenical upheaval?

We are dealing with an amoral economic and political system. From its behavior 2,600 years ago in Athens, to its determination to keep boosting the destruction of the natural world and keep poisoning the food of Americans in the twenty-first century, to, finally, pretending in 2019 there's no global warming, it is obvious capitalism in its present form should not exist.

However, capitalism is no abstraction. It brings food on the table, but it also poisons and revolutionizes the present. Most of politicians, especially Republicans, have absorbed "conservative" ideology and money of petroleum lobbyists and company executives willing to foreclose the future of the younger generation for the convenience of maintaining their present profits. Now, that's a huge crime condemning to certain oblivion millions of Americans and billions of humanity.

What can we say about this society that tolerates such inhumane leadership? No one should have that kind of power.

Joseph Stiglitz, professor of economics at Columbia University, is also concerned about the future of capitalism. He is trying to save capitalism from itself by proposing the injection of ethics into politics and economics: "a truly ethical capitalism," he says, "must simultaneously address structural inequality and the environment. Time is not on our side.... We can create a more ethical capitalism, designed to shape a more selfless society."

True, we don't have much time and we need a society with fewer selfish people and less selfish people. Stiglitz proposes taxing the rich and downsizing the military. He is also correct that the elephant in the room, inequality, must be reduced to harmless levels.

Government regulation is capable if not humanizing the zealots of greed, but in opening the doors to great opportunities for democratizing the economy and society of America. Give jobs to women and other workers and eliminate discrimination and unemployment, Stiglitz says.

Stiglitz is right that we need to find some kind of equilibrium between reform and violent revolution. He says we need to change our economic and political relationships as fast as we can. He considers such a change "radical" and "existentially urgent."

After all, capitalism and its unacceptable greed caused the French, the Russian, and the Chinese Revolutions.

Capitalism is also responsible for our current existential crisis, the fact we are losing too many species of irreplaceable plants and animals, the fact rising temperatures will be converting the world into an airconditioned nightmare, the fact farming itself may become impossible, in which case, state armed gangs will replace the rule of law and civilization.

If the Democrats capture the Senate and the White House, there's hope for putting a break to the monarchical tendencies of the Republicans and for confronting and abolishing the oil dynasties destroying the Earth and civilization.

First, we must get rid of Trump and his Republican siblings in the Senate. Trump's "retreat on the environment" has been devastating. Second, legislate the taxing of the rich and take away all subsidies to billionaires. All wealthy Americans and billionaires in particular need to pay taxes.

More laws would be necessary to undo the ecocide and injustices of giant farmers, thus revitalizing rural America with small-scale organic family farmers.

Finally, legislate the fast and required transition to solar and wind energy: in transportation, agriculture, and manufacturing. The roofs of all houses and public and private buildings and factories in the country should produce their own electricity with solar panels. End subsidies to fossil fuel industry and, for the most part, after a brief transition to non-polluting energy, outlaw the use of oil, coal, and natural gas.

Were this program to become public policy, all Americans willing and able to work, would work, in rebuilding democracy, economics and the environment. Out of such innovation, cooperation, and trust and work, a new form of ethical, social, and ecological capitalism would probably emerge. Call it green capitalism. Or, better yet, call it ecological civilization. But no matter the name, it should avoid the "lethal growth mania" that, according to Anne and Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University, has been wrecking our civilization.

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