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Capitalism and the Green New Deal



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Environmental destruction— climate change, species loss, oceanic depletion, and the rendering of vast tracts of air, water and land unusable has, according to a group of recent IPCC reports, reached the point where it threatens human existence. In contrast to efforts by different constituencies to limit the scope of concern, what the IPCC makes clear is that environmental decline is a clear and present danger, and that its breadth makes a mockery of calls for simple technical fixes. In fact, many of the proposed solutions to climate change threaten to make species loss and oceanic depletion significantly worse.

Optimism that the incoming Democratic administration will take decisive action to address environmental decline is misplaced. An analogy, in terms of the institutional and political backdrop and an alleged public purpose, is the Affordable Care Act. Sentiment amongst its supporters is that the ACA was better than nothing. In fact, the ACA did not improve health

outcomes. What it accomplished was to secure the role of health insurance companies as healthcare intermediaries and [increase executive pay](#). Thomas Ferguson's 'investment model,' where policy favors are exchanged for political contributions, well predicted this outcome.

The urgency of addressing environmental decline raises the conundrum of how to force political solutions by several degrees of magnitude. Electoral rhetoric had it that the Biden administration would be more amenable to political suasion than Donald Trump because Democrats are more ideologically aligned with the environmental Left. Right. It would be a mistake to assume that Democrats couldn't (wouldn't) make the current situation worse. The political accomplishment of the ACA was to convince half the electorate that important progress had been made when it hadn't, and the other half that viewed the program as 'socialism,' that socialism doesn't work.

For reasons laid out in more detail below, all efforts to tie environmental decline to industrial production— because the charge is true, will result in class conflict. As has been long understood by the environmental Left, environmental decline is class warfare. Oligarchs and corporate executives took the profits from industrial production and socialized the costs. The move by the Democrats to become the party of capital and the rich means that that is where their allegiances lie. The political problem is that to end environmental decline is to force oligarchs and executives to bear the costs of their production, which they will not do.

For conceptual background, industrialism is a set of theories about how the world works. Its motivating logic is that reorganization of the world according to the rules of nature will produce wealth and material provision beyond what had previously been imagined. It was matched with a metaphysical humanism— a theory of human nature, premised in insatiable want and acquisition. By the early part of the twentieth century, this humanism was demonstrated to be descriptively inaccurate. Past a relatively low threshold, acquisition of the stuff that industry produces was a minor pursuit. [Capitalist propaganda](#), today called advertising, was devised to create a culture of insatiable want and acquisition.

This background is needed to challenge the instantiated misdirection that capitalism exists to serve consumer culture. Consumer culture was created to serve capitalists. The pervasiveness of advertising has grown in direct relation to the neoliberal project. The use of psychology to promote want, nominally prohibited well into the 1970s, is barely hidden today. When combined with the century-plus of social organization engineered by and for commercial interests, what is presented as natural development— the layout of the suburbs, the distribution of work, modes of transportation, geopolitical concerns, and consumer culture, are planned creations.

By the late 1960s in the U.S., then the world's premier industrial economy, environmental problems had become so pervasive that industrial pollution was seen as a threat to the legitimacy and continued viability of American-style capitalism. The political divide at the

time was over what methods would best solve it, not whether or not the problem existed. The [EPA](#) (Environmental Protection Agency) was created in 1970 by Republican President Richard Nixon and was headed by Republican administrator William Ruckelshaus as a governmental effort to maintain the legitimacy of industrial capitalism.

The EPA was originally structured to act as a ‘partner’ with business. Like other government regulatory agencies, its capacity for independent research was limited so that it was dependent on commercial laboratories that would intermediate the regulatory process. This framework of regulatory ‘partnering’ became a neoliberal mantra by the 1990s, and was eventually adopted by environmental NGOs as a way to solicit donations from corporate polluters while still claiming to have environmental aims. However, it would be a mistake to presume that early differences over methods of reducing environmental harms were measures of the sincerity of environmental goals.

The conceptual problem still in need of a solution is that if industrial capitalism destroys more than it produces, its legitimating ideology fails. The premise of capitalism lies in the metaphysics of industrial production, where what is produced is claimed to be more than the sum of the pieces that went into it. This difference, and who receives it— capitalists, workers or society-at-large, has been the source of three centuries of political struggle. In this way, environmental destruction gets to the heart of the question of the social legitimacy of capitalism. Unless what is produced is greater than what is consumed in the production process, capitalism is but a shell game, and its wealth illusory.

Because environmental destruction is a material input into industrial production, in that it doesn’t rely on monetary value to be ‘real,’ it adds legitimacy to the Marxist critique of the ethereal (metaphysical) nature of capitalist ideology. This point is central to why capitalist economists have serially understated the true costs of capitalist production. And it is key to why climate science fails to convince industrialists and capitalist ideologues that environmental destruction is a real cost of industrial production. Without monetary value, a ‘price,’ it isn’t real within the capitalist worldview. This ontological point eludes economists of most political persuasions.

While these theoretical issues may seem abstract, they are central to environmental politics. Science is claimed to tie the material world to theory within the ethereal (Cartesian) realm that supports capitalism. When President-elect Joe Biden proclaims that ‘he believes the science,’ he implies that its material claims are true regardless of how they are treated by economists. The logic is as follows: through its material basis, science counts costs that economists don’t. Where there is a difference, prices don’t reflect the material (scientific) costs of production. This difference between the material (scientific) costs and prices is taken as profits by capitalists, while the consequences are borne by the rest of us through environmental destruction.

If Mr. Biden believed his own rhetoric, he would have little choice but to force industrialists to bear the true costs of industrial production. Otherwise, industrial capitalism is variations of the Enron model where people were paid in proportion to their ability to destroy the entire organization. This isn't your dear writer asserting this. It is 'the science' that Mr. Biden claims to believe. Fortunately, we don't have to debate this. 'We' have the science in the form of a series of United Nations / IPCC environmental reports. And these substantially raise the stakes of both action and inaction toward environmental sustainability.

The [2018 IPCC Climate report](#) added carbon capture schemes to the scenarios under which global warming can be kept under its 1.5 degrees C (Celsius) threshold. And a short time later the realm of environmental concern was widened to include [species loss](#), a.k.a. mass extinction, and [oceanic depletion](#). Taken together, these point to the breadth of environmental decline, as well as to the increasingly perilous pathways toward a livable future. To be clear, these IPCC reports only cover the ending-life-on-planet-Earth consequences of industrial production. The rendering of air, water and land unfit for consumption represents real economic costs, whether or

All of the political solutions being proposed derive from the perspective that 'something is better than nothing.' In analytical terms, there is 'the science,' which provides probability-weighted best guesses based on current understanding of the available evidence, and then there is nihilism. What will get us through the next few years, the operating premise of all of the political solutions, will more likely than not result in mass death, destruction, misery and deprivation in a longer timeframe. This is what 'the science' is suggesting.

The tension between theories of environmental limits and human ingenuity has held the hypothesized limits at bay for two centuries. Thomas Malthus's conundrum of exponential population growth versus linear growth in food production was met with exponential growth in food production through the introduction of industrial agriculture. Chicken Little has been invoked every time that environmental limits have been raised since. In contrast, the IPCC was, if anything, too generous regarding the likely impact that unproven technologies will have on solving climate change.

Additionally, following from industry and academic practice, the IPCC Climate Report was conceived in a Climate silo to exclude the wider environmental consequences of new technologies that are being developed to address climate change. Lambert Strether did yeoman's work [here](#) with respect to the carbon capture method known as BECCS (Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage). In practice, for BECCS to be scaled to capture carbon as imagined by the IPCC, monoculture planting of an area one-and-one-half times the size of India would have to be planted. The term 'insane' comes to mind, right after infeasible.

Monoculture planting in industrial agriculture has led to near total dependence on chemical fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides. Otherwise, isolated infestations can quickly devastate entire crops because natural barriers have been removed. The point: the IPCC's climate

solutions make mass extinction more likely. They are based on technologies that haven't been scaled— and aren't logically scalable, and they suffer from the same siloed view of environmental destruction. While new technologies are likely to be developed, they emerge from the same closed logic that is destroying the planet.

From the political Right come claims that the IPCC scenarios are alarmist, and that they require Stalinist-style central planning to implement. Ironically, this is the tactic used by capitalists for two centuries as they combined corporate with state power so that a tiny cabal of very rich people could systematically destroy the planet. No vote was taken, no consensus was sought, and no permission was asked. The claim that killing the planet is 'freedom,' but that trying to stop people from killing the planet is a totalitarian takeover of the free enterprise system, would find a surprising number of takers in the D.C. political establishment.

The Liberal / Left plan to date has been to grossly understate the breadth of environmental decline in order to achieve milquetoast half-measures under one of two theories of change. The first is based on estimates of what is politically feasible. Should this be less than obvious, a Green New Deal crafted by the Biden administration probably will 1) fail to address environmental decline in any material way while 2) creating a field for Green opportunists to create 'solutions' that make them rich while 3) 'proving' to the half of the country that views all government programs as socialist that socialism doesn't work.

The second is the Left think-tank proposal that proceeds from the premise that capitalism is an unmitigated gift to humanity and that every single premise of capitalist economics, no matter how conspicuously idiotic it might be, describes capitalist outcomes in empirical terms that are both inviolate and invariant. Additionally, they proceed from the minimalist interpretation of climate change as a minor technical quirk, akin to a large fart really, that can be solved through modest investment in Green energy. The goal of these proposals is to responsibly 'weigh-in' at international confabs where responsible people meet to produce irresponsible outcomes.

Missing from both is 'the science' that the IPCC so conveniently provides, plus any reference to the conceptual problem that makes capitalist economic theories blind to the material costs of environmental destruction. Part of the value of the IPCC's follow-on papers regarding species loss and oceanic depletion is that they offer convincing evidence that limiting the realm of environmental concern to climate change will be similar to understating the risk of climate change three decades ago. Understating the scale and scope of environmental decline will more likely than not serve to worsen the problem.

'Outsourced' carbon emissions is industrial pollution from both consumption and outsourced American industrial production that is counted on the environmental ledgers of other countries. Once outsourced carbon emissions are accounted for, a tiny fraction of the very wealthy within the U.S. are responsible for a grotesquely outsized proportion of global

emissions. National carbon emissions estimates suggest a per capita basis that is unreflective of the true distribution. The claim that the U.S. is no longer a major emitter of greenhouse gases misses outsourced carbon emissions, as well as the concentration of culpability for industrial pollution and outsized consumption amongst rich Americans.

Consumer culture ‘benefits’ consumers in the same way that capitalist employment ‘benefits’ workers. Advertising wouldn’t exist if the want and acquisitive nature of capitalist theory were descriptively accurate. The first two-thirds of American history was of coercing people to comport with the demands of capitalist employment. Consumer culture is the manufactured ‘carrot’ now used to motivate the ‘stick’ of capitalist employment. By degree, people now work to buy the stuff they wouldn’t want if it weren’t for capitalist propaganda. This proposition could be tested by ending advertising, with a just transition for its former workers.

When you actually speak with working-class Republicans about the ACA, they hate it because it isn’t capitalist, not because it is. This is paradoxical, because the Obama administration’s institutional logic was that adding market mechanisms would make it capitalist, and therefore efficient. This D.C. ‘brokerage’ model, where Congress crafts outcomes beneficial to oligarchs and corporate executives, is what half or more of the country believes that ‘socialism’ is. Implied by the inclusion of market mechanisms in neoliberal programs is that markets are a force of nature. If they are ‘natural,’ why then is the Federal government imposing them?

The problem for a Green New Deal isn’t that it can’t be used to solve environmental problems, but that it won’t be. Without a program for a just transition, the possible outcomes are a capital strike that ‘proves’ that environmental activism is a fool’s errand, or that shoveling Federal money to ‘green’ capitalists in return for campaign donations is the Biden administration’s grift. However, the science is in regarding environmental decline. Just being cynical isn’t an option. Five decades of neoliberalism have turned the Federal government into a wall that now stands between political activists and the oligarchs. I’ve always preferred climbing over walls, but going around or under them works just as well.

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