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Beyond “Green Capitalism”*

by Victor Wallis

The ecological crisis as a crisis of capitalism

A disdain for the natural environment has characterized capitalism from the beginning. As Marx noted, capital abuses the soil as much as it exploits the worker.¹ The makings of ecological breakdown are thus inherent in capitalism. No serious observer now denies the severity of the environmental crisis, but it is still not widely recognized as a *capitalist* crisis, that is, as a crisis arising from and perpetuated by the rule of capital and hence incapable of resolution within the capitalist framework.

It is useful to remind ourselves that although Marx situated capitalism’s crisis-tendencies initially in the business cycle (specifically, in its downward phase), he recognized at the same time that those tendencies could manifest themselves under other forms – the first of these being the drive to global expansion.² Such manifestations are not inherently cyclical; they are permanent trends. They can be sporadically offset, but for as long as capitalism prevails, they cannot be reversed. They encompass 1) increased concentration of economic power, 2) increased polarization between rich and poor, both within and across national boundaries, 3) a permanent readiness for military engagement in support of these drives, and 4), of special concern to us here, the uninterrupted debasement or depletion of vital natural resources.

The economic recession of 2008, widely recognized as the most severe since the post-1929 depression, has been variously interpreted on the Left in terms of whether or not capital can overcome it by in effect restoring the restraints – some them socially progressive – that it had accepted (in the United States) in the 1930s. To the extent that such remediation is viewed as possible, the crisis is seen as undermining only the neoliberal agenda and not capitalism as such.³ In that case, we would be witnessing a perhaps cyclical return to a period of greater governmental regulation (including greater responsiveness to limited working-class demands).

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¹ Speaking respectively of “large-scale industry” and “industrially pursued large-scale agriculture,” Marx wrote, “the former lays waste and ruins labour-power and thus the natural power of man, whereas the latter does the same to the natural power of the soil.” *Capital*, vol. 3, tr. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 950.

² *Communist Manifesto*, section I.

³ Rick Wolff, “Economic Crisis from a Socialist Perspective,” *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 50 (July 2009), 3.

But what is not at all cyclical – and what most sharply distinguishes the present crisis from that of the 1930s – is the backdrop of aggravated environmental devastation. The reign of capital has now been thrown into disarray not only by financial chaos, but also by the shrinkage and disruption of the natural infrastructure which serves not only the survival needs of the human species but also the particular requirements of the capitalist ruling class. The immediate grounds for ruling-class concern arise along several major axes: *a)* rising raw-material and energy costs, *b)* losses from catastrophic climate events, and *c)* mass dislocation, popular disaffection, and eventual social upheaval.

It is this set of preoccupations that drives the political agenda of “green capitalism.” While there are obvious points of convergence between different green agendas, it eventually becomes clear that any full merger between an agenda that is insistently capitalist and one that accentuates the green dimension is impossible. On the other hand, immediate pro-ecology steps are urgently needed, irrespective of their sponsorship. The resulting dilemma is one that the Left must face without delay, as an integral step in developing whatever more radical strategy might be possible for the longer term.

The “green capitalist” agenda⁴

At a conceptual level, it is clear that “green capitalism” seeks to bind together two antagonistic notions. To be green means to prioritize the health of the ecosphere, with all that this entails in terms of curbing greenhouse gases and preserving biodiversity. To promote capitalism, by contrast, is to foster growth and accumulation, treating both the workforce and the natural environment as mere inputs.

Capital is no stranger to contradiction, however. Just as it seeks to balance market-expansion with wage-restraint, so it must seek to balance perpetual growth with preservation of the basic conditions for survival. Despite the ultimate incompatibility of these two goals, therefore, capital must to some extent pursue both at once. Although green capitalism is an oxymoron, it is therefore nonetheless a policy-objective. Its proponents thus find themselves in an ongoing two-front struggle against, on the one hand, capital’s more short-sighted advocates and, on the other, the demand for a far-reaching ecologically grounded conversion of production and consumption.

The green capitalist vision is sometimes associated with small enterprises, which can directly implement green criteria by, for example, using renewable energy sources, avoiding toxic chemicals, repairing or recycling used products, and minimizing reliance on long-distance shipment for either supplies or sales. But the scope of such practices is likely to be severely limited by market-pressures. The aspect of local self-sufficiency is most widely seen in the food-services sector, especially in farmers’ markets, which have experienced a notable resurgence in recent years in industrialized countries. This corresponds more to what Marx called “simple commodity production,” however, than to capitalist enterprise. Agribusiness allows residual space for it, but at the same time

⁴ This section is drawn from my report written for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (www.rosalux.de), entitled “The ‘Green Capitalist’ Agenda in the United States: Theory, Structure, Alternatives,” published in English in Stephan Kaufmann & Tadzio Müller, *Grüner Kapitalismus: Krise, Klimawandel und kein Ende des Wachstums* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2009) and posted on the foundation’s website.

undercuts it through *a*) economies of scale facilitated by technologies of food processing and storage, *b*) political clout, resulting in subsidies, and *c*) reliance on a typically migrant workforce that receives less than a living wage. Because of the resulting cost-differences (as well as inconveniences of access), patronage of farmers' markets is likely to remain primarily a political choice until much more is done to offset the artificial competitive edge enjoyed by the food-industrial complex.

Focusing now on the dominant corporate sector, we find the green capitalist agenda expressed partly by the enterprises themselves, partly by industry associations, and partly by government.⁵ For the corporations themselves, "green" practice takes essentially three forms: 1) energy-saving and other cost-cutting measures which are advantageous to them in any case; 2) compliance with whatever regulations may be enforced by a government in which they normally have a large voice; and 3), most importantly, public relations (PR). The industry associations further amplify the PR aspect, playing an especially vital role on the global stage, where they strive to establish the common assumptions underlying international agreements. They have worked extensively to influence the United Nations Development Program, and they also carry out large-scale lobbying campaigns to set negotiating parameters for the periodic Earth Summits (Rio de Janeiro 1992, Kyoto 1997, Johannesburg 2002, Copenhagen 2009). The Business Council for Sustainable Development thus came into being in the run-up to the Rio conference, declaring in its charter that "economic growth provides the conditions in which protection of the environment can best be achieved." Under its influence, the monitoring of global environmental measures was entrusted to the World Bank, which in the ensuing decade paradoxically invested more than 15 times as much in fossil-fuel projects as in renewable energy.⁶ The Kyoto conference advanced similar criteria five years later by enshrining emissions-trading as the strategy for battling global warming. This practice, under the rubric of "cap and trade," has become the centerpiece of governmental proposals in the United States. It posits an incentive-based approach to corporate policy, under which enterprises participate in a market in pollution-credits. Because of the political clout of the corporations, however, the initial cost of these credits may be reduced to zero. At the same time, the most severe industrial offenders are allowed to "offset" their damages elsewhere (e.g. by funding reforestation programs) rather than directly curtailing them.

Cutting across all corporate insertions into the environmental debate is the assumption that the basic instruments for responding to ecological crisis are technology and the market. The technological fixation has been a constant of capitalist development. Initially focused on maximizing labor productivity, it is continuously replenished by ever more miraculous applications, especially in the spheres of communication and of genetic engineering. The unending proliferation of innovations – a hallmark of late capitalism⁷ – lends credence, in public perception, to the idea that there is no challenge that technology cannot overcome. The unstated premise behind such claims is that the selection of any technology will continue to reflect corporate interests, which in turn reflect the goals

⁵ For a more extensive treatment, see Victor Wallis, "Capitalist and Socialist Responses to the Ecological Crisis," *Monthly Review*, vol. 60, no. 6 (November 2008).

⁶ Kenny Bruno and Joshua Karliner, *earthsummit.biz: The Corporate Takeover of Sustainable Development* (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2002), 30.

⁷ Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975), 192.

implicit in market competition, i.e., profit-maximization, growth, and accumulation. While green technologies – e.g., renewable energy sources – may attract a degree of corporate attention (thanks mainly to social/political pressure), nothing short of a change in the basic locus of economic decision-making will stop certain corporations from continuing to pursue established [non-green] lines of production. Insofar as they must nonetheless try to present themselves in green clothing, they will not hesitate to misrepresent the questions at stake and to invoke technological “solutions” that have little chance of being successfully implemented.

A revealing and economically important illustration of this dynamic is the advocacy of so-called “clean coal.” To begin with, much of the coal industry’s PR emphasis is placed on the removal of specific impurities (such as sulfur and particulates) from coal-burning emissions, overlooking the fact that the biggest problem is the combustion process itself and the resultant rise in atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide. When this unavoidable “bottom line” can no longer be ignored, the industry, not wishing to be restrained even by such modest disincentives as a carbon tax, will assert, with CEO Steven Leer of Arch Coal Inc., that “the enabling technology for stabilizing carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere is carbon capture and sequestration. There is not another option.”⁸ Carbon capture and sequestration (CCS), however, is an unproven technology, with problems not unlike those associated with any toxic byproduct that has to be disposed of in very large quantities. While it is possible to isolate CO₂ emissions and to pump them into out-of-the-way sites (whether underground or perhaps even under the ocean), the potential blowback from such undertakings, once they exceed a certain threshold, is uncertain, incalculable, and possibly catastrophic.⁹

The desirability of shifting to certain inexhaustible or renewable energy sources is obvious. What is not so widely recognized, however, is that these sources too have their costs – in terms of installation, collection, maintenance, and transmission – and therefore that none of them, despite whatever abundance may characterize their occurrence in nature, can offer unlimited accessibility for energy supply.¹⁰ Some of the alternative sources, such as hydrogen and biomass, themselves require significant if not prohibitive energy inputs. **Biomass** (obtaining fuel from crops) also threatens to reduce the land-area available for growing food. **Hydrogen**, for its part, carries the danger of leakage and of rising to the stratosphere, where it could destroy the ozone layer. Tapping **geothermal energy** can, in certain regions, risk provoking seismic disturbances; in addition, there may be high costs associated with the depth of requisite drilling, and the emerging heat may be dissipated in various ways. **Wind energy**, despite its clear positive potential, is

⁸ Alvin Powell, “Mining Exec: Coal Vital to Energy Mix.” *Harvard University Gazette*, February 9, 2009.

⁹ For an introductory overview of this technology, see Craig Rubens, “Carbon Capture & Sequestration,” *earth2tech*, January 2008 <http://earth2tech.com/2008/01/07/faq-carbon-capture-sequestration/> CCS is, apart from its unpredictable dangers (including suffocation by massive CO₂-inhalation in the event of a sudden accidental release), very costly and energy-intensive. For detailed study and discussion, based on the Dutch experience, see Philip Vergragt, *CCS in the Netherlands: Glass half empty or half full?* (Boston: Tellus Institute, 2008).

¹⁰ The summary that follows is based in part on Tom Blees, *Prescription for the Planet: The Painless Remedy for Our Energy and Environmental Crises* (self-published, www.booksurge.com, 2008), 63-86, and, for solar power, on calculations presented in Gregory Meyerson and Michael Joseph Roberto, “Obama’s New New Deal and the Irreversible Crisis.” *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 50 (July 2009), 64n. Blees’ critical summary is useful irrespective of whether or not one shares his view that what must therefore be pursued is an updated version of nuclear power.

limited by materials and space requirements, as well as by the irregularity of its source in many locations. **Tidal power** is more continuous than wind energy, but in addition to the high installation cost of its requisite barrages or underwater turbines, it poses – as do wind turbines – certain dangers for resident or migrant wildlife. **Solar energy**, finally, is extraordinarily promising in direct localized applications, but for power-generation on a large scale, it would risk impinging on space required for other purposes. As for solar collectors situated in otherwise unused desert regions, their dust-free maintenance in such sites would require the long-distance trans-shipment of vast quantities of water.

All these technologies, with the partial exception of biomass, avoid adding to the net concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere. The same might perhaps be said of **nuclear power**, provided that, as the more up-to-date versions promise, it does not entail further large-scale mining and refinement of fissionable material. Nuclear power has other problematic implications, however, beyond its daunting startup costs in both time and money. Even if we were to suppose – as is further claimed – that the problem of waste has been minimized via repeated re-use (until there is hardly any radioactive material left) and that the dangers of a Chernobyl-type disaster or of vulnerability to military attack have been addressed by engineering improvements,¹¹ there still remains the fact that nuclear power is linked to the potential for making bombs, and no disarmament process is underway. The imperialist governments will therefore not allow nuclear power to be diffused on a scale sufficient to match the potential global demand for it. The longer-term ecological and political desideratum would be not to undo such restrictions, but rather to impose them on the imperialist powers themselves, as part of a full-scale conversion process.

The upshot of all these considerations is that the question of how to supply the world's currently growing energy demand without continuing recourse to CO₂-producing fossil fuels – coal, oil, and natural gas – has not yet been solved. In view of the problems associated with all of the alternative energy sources, a radical and comprehensive reconsideration of the demand side of this equation would seem to be called for. This is the essence of the socialist response: while encouraging the use of various safe-energy alternatives, it can accept the fact that these alternatives are ultimately limited in their total power-generating capacity, and therefore that the world's aggregate energy-consumption will actually have to be *reduced*. Once this is understood, one can then focus on the interrelated issues of how to identify and prioritize real needs and how to correspondingly reorganize society, in such a way as to assure everyone's well-being. This is beyond the purview of capitalist thought, whatever its level of awareness of the environmental danger.

The politics of reduced energy consumption

¹¹ I refer here again to Blee's *Prescription for the Planet*, which argues that the new Integral Fast Reactors (IFRs) have solved the technical problems of safety and waste associated with earlier generations of nuclear power plants. The support recently expressed for nuclear power by climatologist James Hansen (author of "The Threat to the Planet," *New York Review of Books*, July 13, 2006) gives unexpected reinforcement to such contentions. But even in the absence of severe mishaps, the underlying risk of accumulated radiation effects on workers and, through them, on the wider population, remains. See John W. Gofman and Arthur R. Tamplin, *Poisoned Power: The Case Against Nuclear Power Plants Before and After Three Mile Island* (1979), <http://www.ratical.org/radiation/CNR/PP/>.

The ecological movement, as it has so far developed, has not yet been able to mount a socially persuasive agenda for reducing energy consumption on a large scale. Broadly speaking, critique of the capitalist growth-model has advanced along two paths which, although complementary in their ultimate thrust, have tended to clash politically. On the one hand has been the tradition identifiable with the “small is beautiful” slogan, associated with localism, ruralism, and (in varying degrees) rejection of “industrial society.” This tradition understands the danger of growth but tends to link it with the general condition of modernity, including modern technology, population increase, and urbanization.¹² On the other hand is the socialist tradition, which, drawing on Marx, sees growth not in terms of human evolution as such, but rather in terms of the specific drives unleashed by capital. In its political expression, however, this tradition has been associated with revolutionary regimes arising in countries of widespread poverty where the top priority appeared to be a form of “socialist growth.” As a result of this association – buttressed by real or ascribed failings of the regimes in question – critics of growth tended also to become critics of socialism, which they saw as sharing the major negative traits of capitalism. Conversely, those who felt the urgency of emerging from poverty rejected the anti-growth posture, viewing it as an ideological expression of sectors whose needs were already satisfied and who would unfairly deny similar satisfaction to others.

A theoretical resolution to this antagonism already exists. It is implicit in Marx’s dual focus on nature and man as sources/creators of wealth and as objects of capitalist depredation. The link has been discussed in depth by, among others, writers such as Paul Burkett, John Bellamy Foster, Joel Kovel, and Richard Levins. Foster’s book *Marx’s Ecology*, in particular, refutes the productivist stereotype of Marx’s thinking, and Levins has presented a concise yet wide-ranging refutation of developmentalist assumptions, informed by a blend of dialectical thought, biological expertise, and farming experience.¹³ Reading this literature, one can see implicit in the Marxist critique of capital a call for undoing high tech agriculture, restoring biodiversity, drastically reducing the volume of long-distance trade, and generally bringing technology under social or community control. These are the same goals enunciated by the zero-growth activists (who stress lifestyle choices and local actions over challenges to state power), but the realization of those goals is, for Marxists, clearly linked up with class struggle. The basis for this link is simply that without successful class struggle, the major vectors determining trade patterns and technological development will continue to be those of the capitalist market.

There is thus a clear theoretical symbiosis between ecological thinking and the anti-capitalist critique. Two major strands of radical activism are thereby poised to function as one, in the sense that the ecological movement, in seeking to override market dictates, is at its core anti-capitalist, while the critique of capitalism is, in its rejection of

¹² An influential expression of this tradition is Herman E. Daly and Jonathan B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); see also Clive Ponting, *A New Green History of the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

¹³ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Yrjö Haila and Richard Levins, *Humanity and Nature: Ecology, Science, and Society* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), chapter 5 (“Agricultural Ecology”).

the growth/accumulation imperative, inherently ecological.¹⁴ The resultant socialist ecology or ecological socialism constitutes a full-blown alternative to the dominant ideology. Its political potential, moreover, should be greatly enhanced by the 2008 financial collapse, which showed up the hollowness of capitalist “prosperity.” Yet there remain huge obstacles to *popular* recognition of the link between ecology and socialism, and hence to popular support for an agenda of collectively planned, society-wide reduction in energy-use. What are these obstacles, and how can they be overcome?

Although the growth-imperative at the macro level is specific to capitalism, it is not without some grounding in longer-standing human traits. Indeed, this is what makes possible the very idea of seeing growth as an inherent human pursuit. Like all such generalizations, it has a strand of accuracy which is then amplified to the point of blotting out the truth of the whole. It is legitimate to say that there is a natural human striving for improvement and even for perfection. This is evident in various forms of artistic expression throughout the ages, as it is also in the care of artisans – whether individually or as part of a team – to make the best possible product. The goal of growth intersects with such striving in a qualified way. A healthy plant, animal, or human must grow to full stature. One can even say something similar of a community, which, unless it reaches a certain threshold of size and productive capacity, cannot expect to provide the range of services and diversions required in order to offer a satisfying life to each of its members.

But in any such unit of growth, one must distinguish optimum from maximum. Optimum growth for any living entity is part of what constitutes fulfillment of its potential. Anything above optimum, however, is pathological: the organism, whether an individual or a community, suffers disequilibrium either among its component parts or between itself and its environment (or both).

Capital’s growth-impulse is inscribed in its credo of accumulation. Its objective limits are determined, in the short run, by saturation of the market and in the long run by exhaustion of resources. When its productive potential is stymied, it turns to financial speculation, which only increases the gulf between the capitalist class and the rest of the species. Because of imperialist relations, deprivation is particularly vast, widespread, and seemingly intractable in countries of the global South. This has the ironic effect of creating a constituency which, although desirous of revolutionary redistribution, may at the same time be receptive to calls for growth as a kind of compensatory entitlement, as its members seek to overcome the huge gap between their own consumption-levels and those prevalent within the imperial metropolis.

Insofar as the world’s poor – and/or those who purport to speak for them on the global stage – retain this longing to ape the extravagant US-advertised lifestyle, the US leadership will continue to invoke the poor countries’ demands as a pretext for rejecting its own ecological responsibility. The governments of the United States on the one hand and of countries such as China and India on the other will remain locked together in a dance of death, in which each partner invokes the other’s intransigence to justify its own. The impact of progressive ecological steps taken in other countries will be severely limited, and most of the world’s peoples will be reduced to the status of spectators if not

¹⁴ Victor Wallis, “Toward Ecological Socialism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 12, no. 1 (March 2001), 132f; see also Michael Löwy, “Eco-Socialism and Democratic Planning,” *Socialist Register 2007* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

victims of the ongoing environmental breakdown. This is the prospect that now looms over the imminent Summit in Copenhagen.

An alternative to this bleak scenario, if there is to be one, will depend primarily on the impact of popular movements around the world. There are promising steps in this direction, from both the South and the North, although the idea of a policy-link to socialism – let alone of a politically powerful organization to articulate and embody such a link – remains elusive. The incipient efforts deserve our attention, as does the question of how to surmount the conceptual impasse that frustrates international negotiations.

In search of a mass movement for ecological socialism

The most massive expressions of radical environmental awareness have arisen among the peasants and indigenous peoples of the global South. For these populations, the capitalist/productivist plunder of the environment – in the form of deforestation, reckless or deliberate pollution, sea-level rise from global warming, and misuse of fresh water (flooding by dams or depletion of aquifers) – is a direct assault on their homes and livelihoods.¹⁵ Their sense of outrage and desperation is beyond measure. It is, moreover, a *community* sentiment on the part of people who are being stripped of everything and whose plight leads them to consciously reject the entire agenda of the invasive force. One would have to return to the early days of capitalism to find a comparable unanimity of antagonism to the agencies of exploitation.

Yet while the anger and its justification are not unprecedented, the basis for the current movement distinguishes itself from that of earlier resistance in at least two ways, one of which makes it weaker but the other of which could give it greater strength. The weakening factor has to do with dispensability. Through all its phases, capital has sought limitless supplies of its necessary inputs, including human labor power – for which its early recourse to open slavery has given way in more recent times to the large-scale abuse of migrant laborers and in some countries also of prisoners. Alongside this element of continuity, however, has come, with labor-saving technological advances, a markedly increased propensity on the part of capital to view certain populations as altogether expendable. Insofar as these populations exist on the margins of capitalist production, they lack economic leverage, and their demands – much less their sufferings – therefore carry no political weight. So far as capital is concerned, they can thus be consigned with impunity to sickness, dispersion, or death.

Where then lies the potential strength of this constituency? They do indeed hold one card which was not available to their exploited counterparts of an earlier age. Their direct tie to the long-term sustainability of the land, at a time when such sustainability is being everywhere undermined, gives them in fact a strategic placement which contrasts diametrically with the supposed superfluity to which they have been relegated by capital. Their own “parochial” needs embody the collective need of the entire human species – not to mention other endangered life-forms – to stop the relentless destruction of the ecosphere. Ironically, therefore, although such peoples are among the world’s poorest not

¹⁵ Numerous cases from Latin America are analyzed in *Nacla Report on the Americas*, vol. 42, no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2009) and in Gerardo Rénique, ed., *Latin America: The New Neoliberalism and Popular Mobilization*, in *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 51 (November 2009). See also the Joseph Berlinger’s 2009 documentary film on the struggle in Ecuador, *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (<http://www.crudofilm.com/>).

just by capitalist standards (personal possessions) but also in terms of access to the means of mass communication, they have been thrust into a vanguard position, on a par with that of Cuba,¹⁶ in the global eco-socialist movement.

Visible expressions of this leadership role have so far been sporadic, beginning with direct, on-site confrontations – especially dramatic in recent years in Latin America and India – but progressing to the world stage via international conferences of indigenous peoples,¹⁷ interventions at the United Nations,¹⁸ and participation in the annual gatherings of the World Social Forum (WSF). From such platforms they have been able to remind a worldwide audience how arbitrary has been the whole historical development underlying commonly held assumptions about the way our species should live. Their most recent WSF declaration (from Belém in 2009) characteristically includes statements like the following:

Modern capitalism was initiated centuries ago and imposed in America with the invasion of October 12, 1492. This gave way to global plundering and invented theories of "races" to justify American ethnocide, the incursion in Africa for its slave trade, and the plundering of other continents.[...]

... what is in crisis is capitalism, Euro-centrism, with its model of Uni-National State, cultural homogeneity, western positive rights, developmentalism and the commodification of life.[...]

We belong to Mother Earth. We are not her owners, plunderers, nor are we her vendors, and today we arrive at a crossroads: imperialist capitalism has shown [itself] to be dangerous not only due to its domination, exploitation and structural violence but also because it kills Mother Earth and leads us to planetary suicide, which is neither "useful" nor "necessary".¹⁹

This perspective is clearly one that speaks for a bigger constituency than that of its immediate exponents. Indigenous peoples, numbering approximately 300 million worldwide, constitute no more than 5% of the total human population. From a sociological standpoint, they are simply an ethno-linguistic category, distinguished above all by their immemorial roots in a particular locality. But in terms of their collective message in an epoch of environmental breakdown, they express, more completely than any other demographic group, the common survival interest of humanity as a whole.

Our theoretical challenge is to define an arena of negotiation, and eventually a political strategy for reconciliation, between the global perspective of the indigenous peoples and the ongoing though in part disputable needs of the much larger population – in its majority, the international working class of the 21st century – that has been drawn

¹⁶ Cuba's special significance as an ecological model, including its shift to 80% organic agriculture with large-scale urban gardening, is well brought out in the 2006 documentary film, *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (<http://www.powerofcommunity.org/cm/index.php>).

¹⁷ See for example materials on the 4th Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples (May 2009) in Puno, Peru, which drew 6500 delegates from 22 countries (<http://cumbrecontinentalindigena.wordpress.com/>).

¹⁸ UN interventions culminated in 2007 with the General Assembly's overwhelming ratification of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/en/declaration.html>), which includes in its Preamble a clause "Recognizing that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment."

¹⁹ <http://www.indigenousportal.com/News/Declaration-of-Indigenous-Peoples-at-the-World-Social-Forum-Bel%C3%A9m-Amazon-Brazil.html>.

into a mode of life far removed from the one that the indigenous are striving to preserve.²⁰

From our earlier discussion it is clear that total energy-consumption must be drastically reduced. To this end, indigenous communities can offer inspiration in several respects. They tend to be exemplary in their reverence for the natural world, as also in their material self-sufficiency, their rejection of individual property-rights, their egalitarianism, and their sense of mutual accountability.

But how can these virtues, embodied in defiantly autonomous communities, with a way of life in many cases defined by low population-density, be acquired on a massive scale by the other 95% of the world's people? – the majority of whom inhabit large urban settlements in which they have become alienated from the natural world and acculturated to livelihoods characterized, at one end of the spectrum, by energy-intensive services and comfort and, at the other, by a desperate and competitive scramble to stay alive.

This question is in essence the present-day form taken by long-standing enigmas of revolutionary transformation. From the beginning of the capitalist epoch, the challenge has centered on attaining class-consciousness, a key component of which is the process by which wage-workers come to recognize that their interests are better served by mutual cooperation than by competition (which, in terms of contending wage-claims, has always entailed a race to the bottom – whether with one's immediate co-workers or with others in distant locations). The progression from a competitive to a cooperative or solidaristic mindset is a cultural shift. As such, it weakens or undercuts ingrained defenses and prejudices. On a limited scale, it prefigures the new constellation of attitudes associated with the socialist project.

Such an initial step in the process of transformation has been an experience common to most countries. It has typically been offset, however, and in many instances reversed, by the enormous economic impact of transnational corporations. Previously powerful labor movements have suffered dramatic declines in membership, and their surviving leaderships have often been forced to accept humiliating concessions, always under the threat of an even worse alternative. Their readiness to acquiesce was forged, in the US case, during the post-World War II period of labor's direct partnership with global capital. Now, in their weakened position, US labor leaders are less capable than ever of challenging capitalist priorities. Instead, often in defiance of programmatic demands of their membership, they give unconditional support to one of the country's two capitalist governing parties.²¹

In the wake of this evolution, any revival of the latent working-class predisposition to solidarity will have to come at least in part on the basis of a whole new set of cultural influences. These can be drawn from a mix of sources. Looking again at the US case (no doubt the most resistant to such change), one possible source of fresh

²⁰ In many countries experiencing large-scale urban migration, one cannot draw a sharp distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. People who have left their original territories may preserve much of their culture, as in the city of El Alto, Bolivia (see Adolfo Gilly, "Bolivia: A 21st-Century Revolution," *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 39, November 2005). The global figure of 300 million indigenous could in this respect be viewed as an underestimate. In addition, the communication boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous may sometimes be more porous than this apparent dichotomy suggests.

²¹ See Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London: Verso, 1997).

perspectives may be the arrival of immigrant workers with experience of class struggle in their home countries.²² Another may be the impact of various social movements, including those of radical youth, from outside the workplace. But a very important additional source, sooner or later, will be awareness of the environmental crisis: in particular, the understanding that it cannot be adequately addressed merely by a mass of individual responses.

At this point, the collective nature of the response put forward by indigenous communities could resonate within an otherwise disoriented and dispirited working class. Most especially, if the struggles of those communities were to become widely known, they could further energize the current revival of worker self-management initiatives. Already, the recent chain of bankruptcies in the United States, as well as that of 2002 in Argentina, has given workers new inducements to take over their factories.²³ In Venezuela, a similar process has evolved in response to economic sabotage by capitalist opponents of the Bolivarian Revolution.²⁴ The potential for ecologically informed redesign of production processes could generate added motivation for such initiatives: workers not only can see at first hand where materials and energy have been wasted; they also identify as a matter of course with the nearby population's non-negotiable interest (and their own) in eliminating or neutralizing toxins.

Complementing such workplace-grounded developments are those which may occur in the neighborhoods. Again, the indigenous models would have to be made known through every possible channel. But the manifest breakdown in the supply of fresh produce to poor urban communities will create an opening for new (or in some sense much older) solutions. People could begin to ask themselves why common food-items need to be shipped great distances, via countless intermediaries. The farmers' markets are a first step in breaking out of this circle; a second step, already gaining traction in some places, is urban gardens. All such practices restore a level of direct interaction among people, promoting collective autonomy and undercutting the impact of commodification. The infrastructure required for the necessary cooperative arrangements will be conducive also to political education, which is integral to the overall process. Here again, the experience of indigenous peoples could be brought into play – perhaps even by direct contacts – to combine practical advice with wider inspiration.²⁵

The larger picture here is one of a vast learning process. This is something that revolution has always entailed, but with distinct contours in each period. The present

²² For a suggestive example of such impact, see Héctor Perla Jr., "Grassroots Mobilization against US Military Intervention in El Salvador," *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 48 (November 2008).

²³ On Argentina, see Laura Meyer and María Chaves, "Winds of Freedom: An Argentine Factory under Workers' Control," *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 51 (November 2009). On the US, see Immanuel Ness and Stacy Warner Maddern, "Worker Direct Action Grows In Wake of Financial Meltdown," *Dollars & Sense*, no. 284 (Sept.-Oct. 2009), and also Michael Moore's documentary film, *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009).

²⁴ A useful general analysis is Iain Bruce, *The Real Venezuela: Making Socialism in the 21st Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), esp. ch. 4.

²⁵ Although I here emphasize what indigenous peoples can teach the rest of us, the theoretical dialogue will need to go in both directions, inasmuch as certain spokespersons for the indigenous (e.g., Ward Churchill) and for a "subsistence" approach (e.g., Maria Mies) have popularized a severe misreading of Marx, ascribing to him the very notion of value – as excluding nature – that Marx had identified as a major fault of capital. For a critique of such misreadings, see John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, "The Paradox of Wealth: Capitalism and Ecological Destruction," *Monthly Review*, vol. 61, no. 6 (November 2009), 7-10.

conjuncture is marked by a core paradox. Capitalism is superannuated. This is not just a wishful assertion that it “should have” been superseded; it is recognition of the verifiable fact that its accelerated resource-depletion has outpaced the regenerative capacities of the ecosphere. Under these conditions, the most advanced technological achievements of the capitalist era are, taken as a whole, outdated.²⁶ They are not collectively sustainable over the long term. As a result, they are now forcefully challenged by a perspective which rejects them altogether.

Relatively few, on a world scale, would consciously choose “business as usual” (worst-case scenario for the *Stern Review*)²⁷ over species-survival. But the vast majority of the non-indigenous 95% are caught up in structures – many of them internalized – which impede our efforts to build a new paradigm. Mere exhortation will not induce us to jettison these relics of a nefarious mode of production. As a species, we will have to liberate ourselves “strategically” from the associated habits, by focusing on scale and on degrees of urgency, framing equitable criteria for restricting or eliminating one or another practice – be it a given form of transport, a given item of long-distance trade, or a particular energy-intensive amenity of any kind.²⁸

In carrying out this process, those who do not belong to indigenous communities will have much to learn from those who do. The indigenous communities’ lives are being threatened, however, and their members may be understandably reluctant to visit “alien” territory. But they may also begin to recognize that their own survival depends on whether a transformation takes place in that outside world. If they can contribute to such a revolution, they would thus be serving their own interest as well.

Breaking the Impasse on the World Stage

The emergence of indigenous peoples as an organized presence on the world stage presents an extraordinary opportunity to the rest of humanity. We have already noted the traits which have earned these peoples a leadership role in terms of ecological practice, and how those traits are linked to their rejection of the property regime that underlies capitalism’s growth-impulse. Of equally great importance is the fact that neither the indigenous population as a whole nor any community within it constitutes a nation-state. To the contrary, such a formation would violate their very essence. Instead, the world’s indigenous peoples are spread out over many countries and regions. Only in exceptional cases have their interests attained even limited expression in any national government.²⁹ They therefore act at the global level as a kind of transnational pressure group, advocating for their own interests but, in so doing, serving also as a moral force

²⁶ For detailed discussion, see Victor Wallis, “Socialism and Technology: A Sectoral Overview,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 17, no. 2 (June 2006).

²⁷ *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), a British government report prepared under the direction of Nicholas Stern, is perhaps the most comprehensive formulation of the “green capitalist” perspective. For a critique, see the Introduction by John Bellamy Foster et al. to *Monthly Review*, vol. 60, no. 3 (July-August 2008), 3-6.

²⁸ For a fuller exposition of this point, see my essay, “Vision and Strategy: Questioning the Subsistence Perspective,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 17, no. 4 (December 2006).

²⁹ Where they do attain such representation, as in Bolivia with Evo Morales, the government is inescapably subjected to conflicting pressures (in particular, over the exploitation of energy resources), as a result of which tensions arise between it and its indigenous base.

reminding international organizations of a shared responsibility for the preservation of life.

This new element in the global equation matches the ecological issue itself as a phenomenon transcending national boundaries. It gives us the possibility of rethinking the entire framework of representation that currently exists for addressing matters of worldwide concern. The frustration that has attended international negotiations over environmental policy is well known. National governments speak for the dominant interests in their respective countries; their stances on ecological issues are only as good as they have been pressured to be by each society's working-class and progressive movements.³⁰ Moreover, the aggregate global outcome tends routinely to reflect the position of the ecologically most retrograde of the major powers, which, given the parameters of capitalist competition, are likely – in part precisely because of their ecological negligence – to be the ones with the greatest commercial advantage and therefore the biggest impact. Given this dynamic, the ambitious ecological proposals that may be put forward by other governments will go nowhere.³¹

It is within this arena of inter-government negotiations that the deadly standoff between the most profligate “developed” economy (the United States) and the most populous “developing” countries (China and India) is sustained. The dynamic at work here is reminiscent of the fear of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) that for decades sustained the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, in that in both cases the logic of competition tends to block any concessions. That earlier dance of death ended only with the disintegration of one of the two partners. The present race to environmental oblivion is unlikely to be restrained without a series of political collapses of comparable scope. When the Soviet Union disappeared, the progressive forces in the United States were unprepared to impose the anticipated “peace dividend” (diversion of military expenditure to social reconstruction), because they failed to recognize that, for the forces driving US global military projection, the alleged threat of an equivalent Soviet thrust had never been more than a pretext – for which some substitute would quickly be devised.

At the global level, discussion over how to respond to the environmental dangers requires a new framework. The non-state contours of the worldwide indigenous movement offer a hint as to where to begin. In the environmental debate among states, those opposing the status quo proceed on the assumption that every national unit has equal entitlement (on a per-capita basis) to deplete the earth's resources. This seems fair enough so long as we accept the nation-state as the basic agent of policy, with the implication that the particular earmarking of environmental costs *within* each nation-state is beyond the purview of international scrutiny. But yet this is precisely where the problem lies. Each national aggregate encompasses its own mix of necessary and wasteful expenditures – with the proportion of the latter tending to vary with a country's economic and military power-position (as well as its acquired patterns of excess

³⁰ This does not mean that working-class movements necessarily have progressive positions on ecological issues; what it does mean is that only when they *do* have progressive positions do the latter carry significant weight.

³¹ Ironically, the European governments, which took stronger ecological stances than the US during the Bush administration, have slipped back during the Obama presidency to supporting a US approach of leaving emissions-reduction targets up to individual countries. Naomi Klein, “Obama's Bad Influence,” *The Nation*, November 2, 2009.

consumption).³² Certain types of resource-use must be curbed *wherever* they occur; the fact that they are more prevalent in the richer countries will itself reinforce the concern for seeking equity between richer and poorer regions.

But the global community will now have to promote such equity not only *between* regions, but also within them. Such an externally driven reorientation will of course be fiercely resisted, initially with the argument that it violates sovereignty. National sovereignty, however, is properly understood not to supersede basic human rights, which are what is ultimately at stake in the environmental debate. The irrelevance of national boundaries to the spread of environmental devastation is well known, but the corresponding political conclusions have yet to be widely drawn. This is a clear case where the whole world has a legitimate interest in the measures that may or may not be taken – whether by government or by the private sector – within any given country. Although the formal means to implement this interest are at present very weak, the political potential of such universally formulated criteria has been amply demonstrated in connection with historic struggles against racism (e.g., the United States in the 1960s and South Africa in the 1980s).

In the sphere of environmental policy, the worldwide debate about emissions needs to undergo a radical shift, from a national to a *sectoral* focus.³³ The first sector to be challenged will of course be the military. For each of the sectors that is addressed, however, the key issue to be resolved, through informed, society-wide debate, is: how much of the activity in that sector – and hence, of the resources it consumes – is directed not at the satisfaction of human need but rather at pursuits reflecting the priorities of capital and its ruling class?

It would be illusory to expect such a process to yield a universally accepted set of criteria that could be quickly applied. Like all revolutionary processes, its realization will be beset by obstacles and contingencies. But the challenge of identifying and eliminating social waste could prove to be a powerful unifying force for the vast majority, as it seeks simultaneously to restore the environment and assure the satisfaction of its own needs. The process also readily lends itself to defining short-term targets – particular categories of energy-waste – while nonetheless enabling activists to bring out the full scope of the longer-term task.

³² For an initial attempt at itemizing categories of wasteful expenditure, see Wallis, “Toward Ecological Socialism” (note 14), 135ff.

³³ I noted such a desideratum in an earlier article – “‘Progress’ or Progress? Defining a Socialist Technology,” *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 27 (2000), 56 – but at that time the political forces that might be able to embody its approach were not known to me.