

Suicidal regime

Green capitalism or environmental justice?

It is well known that capitalism co-opts Left ideas for the purpose of increasing profits.

Jacklyn Cock shows how green capitalism has commodified the ecological crisis at a point in our history where we face devastating food and water shortages and cataclysmic climate changes. She argues this can only lead to a deeply unjust world where the gap between rich and poor dramatically widens.

Recently in Alexandra I came across a very badly scarred child. 'Tandi' was disfigured in one of the shack fires that sweep through informal settlements in South Africa almost every weekend. These are fires in which the poorest of the poor lose all their possessions and sometimes even their lives.

The organisation that was arranging plastic surgery for Tandi is called 'Children of Fire'. One of its central projects is to manufacture and distribute wall holders for the candles which frequently overturn and cause these disastrous fires. Clearly this does not go very far towards ending the energy poverty which affects 25% of all South Africans. Fortunately there are other organisations which are focusing on access to safe and affordable sources of energy for all our people.

One organisation is demanding free access to electricity (and to water) for poor people. But this raises problems. South Africa is a water scarce country and at present relies on coal fired power stations which are a major source of the carbon emissions that are causing climate change.

The post-apartheid state's response to both issues, access to water and electricity, was to install pre-paid meters in many townships. The idea of sustainability was used to legitimate this commodification of nature. This emphasis on sustainability has been taken over and appropriated by capitalism. This is deeply ironic because capitalism as a system is not sustainable. We can see this clearly in the ecological crisis.

ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

It is generally acknowledged that we are in the first stages of ecological collapse. We see it in the waste and pollution of crucial natural resources, destruction of habitats, loss of biodiversity and increasingly extreme weather events. The present drought and wild fires in Russia, mudslides and torrential rain in China and floods in Pakistan and Canada are evidence of the climate change brought about by the release of carbon emissions through burning fossil fuels in the form of coal, gas and oil.

All this will have a devastating impact on food production.

CRISIS OF FOOD PRODUCTION

As the ecological crisis deepens, future food production will lack cheap energy, abundant water or a stable climate. The increase in droughts and floods which are part of climate change will cut food production in parts of the world by 50% in the next 12 years. The impact will be particularly severe in Africa.

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that wheat production will disappear from Africa and there will be a marked decrease in the amount of maize under cultivation across the continent.

South Africa is an importer of wheat. Climate change and bad weather conditions have led to increased global wheat prices which in turn will lead to higher food prices. Recently in *The Sunday Independent* the executive director of the South African Chamber of Milling told us that bread, one of our staple foods, will 'definitely cost us a lot more in two or three months'.

Already for many people in South Africa (and throughout the world), good nutritious food is unaffordable. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation is trying to calm fears of a repeat of the global

food crisis of 2008. In that year average food prices around the world rose by 54%.

Capitalism involves a system of industrial agriculture which is not sustainable. It is not sustainable because of its over dependence on non-renewable fossil fuel energy and its destruction of the natural systems on which it depends for its existence. Rising oil prices affect the cost of producing and transporting food. Fertilisers and pesticides are made from petroleum and natural gas. Both are used in planting, harvesting and shipping food.

Nevertheless capital's response to the ecological crisis is that the system can continue to expand by creating a new 'sustainable' or 'green capitalism'. It will bring the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction.

According to John Bellamy Foster, these visions amount to little more than 'a renewed strategy for profiting from planetary destruction.'

GREEN CAPITALISM

The two pillars on which green capitalism rests are technological innovation and expanding markets while keeping the existing institutions of capitalism intact. This is Thomas Friedman's 'green revolution' which relies on linking the two. As he insists, green technology represents 'the mother of all markets'. But if the practice of British Petroleum (BP) is anything to go by, many of these technologies will prioritise risk over the safety of both people and nature.

Green capitalism involves:

- Appeals to nature and even the eco crisis as a marketing tool. Every day driving to work I see a billboard advertising one of our largest banks which states, 'Help combat climate change. Apply for a green affinity card.'

BRIEF
Create an environmental program for our client and a tactical effort to launch it. Make it attractive and relevant so our target felt compelled to get involved in the environmental movement.

EXECUTION
We created the Heineken Green Bag, a re-usable grocery bag made of non-recyclable discarded material from Heineken billboards. A local micro-enterprise of seamstresses crafted them. While we tackled the damaging plastic bag situation, we gave a better use to our trash and helped a Puerto Rican micro-enterprise. The bags are being sold on Heineken.com, the brand's website and also at boutiques.

RESULTS
The Heineken Green Bags became an instant environmental and fashion statement. The first batch of bags was sold in only a few days. Consumers became a walking billboard for Heineken when they shop with our bag. It's an on-going, self-sustainable project.

Green capitalism appeals to nature and uses the eco crisis as a marketing tool.

- Developing largely untested clean coal technology through Carbon Capture and Storage which involves installing equipment that captures carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases and then pumping the gas underground.
- The development of new sources of energy such as solar, nuclear and wind hereby creating new markets.
- The massive development of biofuels which involves diverting land from food production.
- The carbon trading regime enshrined in the Kyoto Protocols involving the commodification of air.

Underlying all these strategies is the process of commodification: the transformation of nature and all social relations into economic relations, subordinated to the logic of the market and the imperatives of profit.

Many of these strategies rely heavily on manipulative advertising

or 'greenwash' to persuade us of their efficacy.

Greenwash is also evident in much corporate sustainability reporting as part of their presentation of a positive image of themselves. The worst corporate polluters in South Africa produce lengthy sustainability reports. The empty nature of their claims is especially evident in the case of Sasol which is the source of half South Africa's carbon emissions, and Arcelor Mittal which is the largest steel producer in the world with a bad environmental record in the 27 different countries where it operates.

Many claims are made about the employment potential of 'green jobs'.

Green jobs are at the centre of global debates on how to move away from a reliance on the 'fossil fuel regime' and build a low carbon capitalism economy. But most analysts fail to address the major challenge of ensuring jobs with decent pay and social security for

thousands of workers employed in energy intensive jobs in the oil, coal, auto, cement and iron and steel industries.

The outcome is that the notion of green or sustainable capitalism is coming under growing criticism.

Critiques of green capitalism are rooted in the understanding that it is capital's logic of accumulation that is destroying the ecological conditions that sustain life. Many world renowned thinkers and sociologists show how capitalism is destroying life.

Barbara Harris-White claims that 'sustainable capitalism is a fiction'.

Samir Amin has criticised 'green capitalism' for 'the complete commodification of the rights of access to the planet's resources.' He points out that Nobel prize winner Joseph Stiglitz openly embraced this capitalist position at the UN in 2009 when he proposed an auction of all the world's natural resources.

World renowned environmental sociologist Joel Kovel however stresses that capitalism threatens human survival. In its unrelenting pressure to expand in the search for profits, it is inherently eco-destructive, which is why he calls capitalism a 'suicidal regime'.

In similar terms, Vandana Shiva stresses 'As expected, the same corporate interests that have created the crisis try to offer the disease as the cure - more fossil fuel based chemical fertilizers.'

A FORTRESS WORLD

As ecological breakdown accelerates the dominant classes will survive, living in protected enclaves in what Foster calls a 'fortress world'. 'Fortress world is a planetary apartheid system, gated and maintained by force, in which the gap between global rich and global poor constantly widens and the differential access to environmental resources and amenities increases sharply. It consists of bubbles of privilege amidst oceans of misery.'

This retreat into fortified enclaves already exists in South Africa, now the most unequal society in the world, as the powerful and the privileged move into the growing number of gated communities and golf estates.

These 'bubbles of privilege' involve the extravagant consumption of scarce natural resources, such as water.

WATER CONSUMPTION

Golf courses use an average of one million litres of water a day. While the Pecanwood Golf Estate near Johannesburg uses 1.5 million litres of water a day, the Pecanwood workers who live in a nearby informal settlement have to walk five kilometres to pay for water at R3 for 20 litres.

In the name of sustainability and cost recovery, pre-paid water meters have been installed in many South African townships. They have had devastating impacts on poor households. The basic allocation of 6 000 litres of free water monthly works out at 25 litres per person per day in an eight person household, enough to flush the toilet twice. The amount should be compared to the average household consumption of 45 to 60 000 litres in the mainly white suburb.

The logic of these technological tools like water meters is to restrain water use in the context of scarcity. The basic need for water, a right in terms of our post-apartheid Constitution, becomes a commodity to be bought and sold.

The post-apartheid state's overall commitment to neo-liberal principles means the prioritising of sustainability, and a preoccupation with cost recovery over high levels of cross subsidisation and equity.

SUSTAINABILITY AND JUSTICE

The key issue about ecological sustainability is to protect limited resources and also to ensure equity which means that resources must be used for the benefit of all, not just for

the privileged few. This means reclaiming the idea of sustainability by linking it to considerations of social and environmental justice.

Both water and electricity environmental justice involve a higher free component funded through a very sharply rising block tariff, in other words much higher levels of cross-subsidisation between the wealthy and the poor.

But capitalism means a world in which inequality is growing and there are billions who are chronically malnourished and lack access to clean water and electricity. This is surely not a world we want to sustain.

For all these reasons, Joel Kovel prefers the term 'sufficiency' to 'sustainability'. 'Sufficiency makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks health care or succor in old age'. This would be a very different world.

ALTERNATIVES TO CAPITALISM

The end of the fossil fuel regime means '... we have before us a period of economic transition as great as, if not greater than, the Industrial Revolution'. This is what Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP had to say recently about the transition to a low carbon economy.

The devastation caused by the BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico indicates what our world will look like if we leave it to people like Tony Hayward to manage this transition. This means that we have to think about alternatives to capitalism. As Kovel and Lowry put it, 'The deepest shadow that hangs over us is neither terror, nor environmental collapse, nor global recession. It is the internalized fatalism that holds there is no possible alternative to capital's world order.'

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