The Revolution will not be Corporatised!

Calls for 'systems change, not climate change' have been minority positions that have gained ground over the last year or so, aided by the likes of Extinction Rebellion, and the school strikes of FridaysForFuture, fronted by the now iconic figure of Greta Thunberg. These new environmental movements have pushed into the background the mealy-mouthed talk of avoiding negative 'framing', supressing terms that disturb people and dismissing catastrophic scenarios. I have previously noted problems with the promotion of such a conformist and conservative rhetorical strategy (Spash 2018). The plain speaking of the new environmental movements places emphasis on an imminent ecological crisis, which has become increasingly more real for many given the steady rise in the frequency of major extreme weather events. The planetary havoc promised by human induced climate change is deemed an 'emergency' entailing a sense of 'urgency'. A primary and repeatedly expressed concern of Greta has been that politicians should 'act' on scientific advice; how they should act is left open but with the admonition that they have done little or nothing but talk for decades. Yet, the 'new' environmentalists appear to lack insight into what specific action is required, to what they stand in opposition and more generally the political and economic context within which they (as social movements) are operating.

The new environmental activists have not addressed the structure of the economic system, the dominant corporate institutions of which it is constituted, the political processes that maintain it, nor how such a system of political economy can realistically be transformed. There is much wishful thinking in their statements. While these movements are internally diverse collectives, elements of both Extinction Rebellion and FridaysForFuture have argued against becoming 'political', while simultaneously engaging in political acts of protest and having agendas that are highly political. There appears to be a belief in objective science informing a political elite, who can be nudged into action, regardless of the structure of the dominant economic system and its power relations. The primary concern has also been narrowly focused around human induced climate change, and often even more narrowly carbon emissions, not systemic social-ecological issues. The failures here go across the board from the political naivety of the protesters (both young and old) to the apologetics for the capital accumulating growth economies made by the exponentially increasing community of academics commenting on environmental policy and specifically climate change.[1] A prevalent claim is that 'the system' can be 'adjusted' without removing corporate or capitalist structures let alone the global

1. For example, in 2019 over 3000, mainly American, economists, including twenty-seven Sveriges Riksbank ('Nobel') Prize winners, endorsed a 'carbon tax' because '[s]ubstituting a price signal for cumbersome regulations will promote economic growth'. (Economists statement on carbon dividends. https://www.econstatement.org/ Accessed 7th May 2019.)

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imperialism they have created under the guise of 'free' trade and unregulated financialisation.

That neoliberal political leaders and the World Economic Forum (WEF), commonly known as the Davos elite, have been hosting Greta and promoting her speeches, raises the question as to what they expect to achieve by doing so. For example, the WEF website promotes a speech, given by Greta in Brussels last year to the international press corps, in which she calls for a new political system without competition, a new economics and a new way of thinking that includes living within planetary boundaries, sharing resources and addressing inequity.[2] Greta has also been cited as calling for corporations to be held responsible for knowingly perpetrating harm and regards this as 'a crime against humanity' (Aronoff 2019), but how are they to be held responsible and what for exactly? And what is the appropriate 'punishment' for their crime? Diverting such general and unspecific criticism and calls for systems change away from radical and revolutionary reform would seem a likely concern for those profiteering from the current system. After the Paris Agreement the world's five largest oil companies spent $1 billion on 'green' rebranding, while simultaneously undermining legislation and establishing new oil supplies.[3] The Davos elite are also adept at borrowing their opponents' language and far from averse to adopting and redirecting a sense of emergency and crisis.

The fact is that political and economic elites around the world have long been taking 'environmental action', to protect not Nature but themselves, against environmentalists and environmental regulation. The public relations end of the spectrum has been corporate social responsibility, green accounting, investment in new technologies, sustainable development and the rhetoric of a 'Green circular inclusive sustainable smart economy'. The opposite end involves corporate funding of denialism and anti-environmental think tanks, media control of the popular discourse, lobbying and funding politicians, capture of environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and personal attacks on scientists. Most directly, protesters and activists are subject to police harassment and brutality, surveillance, infiltration and repression, and are being branded as terrorists, e.g. British police attempts to officially list Extinction Rebellion as such. The toll on both activist and academics is something recently highlighted in this journal (Spash 2018), and especially with regard to those opposing climate change (Hoggett and Randall 2018). In some countries environmental activists are also subject to assassination, especially where they oppose enforced and unjust 'development' in the rush for economic growth.

Indeed, urgency and emergency empower authoritarian regimes in overriding just, legal and democratic processes. They can also be used more subtly to

2. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/climate-strikes-greta-thunberg-calls-for-system-change-not-climate-change-here-s-what-that-could-look-like

3. Report by think tank InfluenceMap 'Big Oil's Real Agenda on Climate Change' cited by Aronoff (2019)

create a sense of insecurity. The last two decades have seen the fear of 'others' being escalated and used to deconstruct post World War II multilateralism and create a new era of unilateralism, in which free-roaming American assassinations are openly bragged about, and respect for the law is increasingly replaced by a lynch-mob mentality. The rise of the extreme right and nationalism has relegitimised sexism, racial hatred, anti-immigrant policies, fortress building, promotion of imperialism, securitisation and militarisation amongst voters of the supposed democracies. The climate crisis, with its threat of mass migration, can therefore play to those claiming to protect jobs, maintain business as usual and defend the existing economic and social structures within which people have created their sense of self and community. However, environmentalism must then be neoliberal and corporate rather than revolutionary.

So the time is ripe for a new neoliberal agenda that adopts calls for urgent radical transformation and uses the environmental movement to support growth and financialisation of Nature. To this end a range of environmental 'deals' were announced in 2019, such as the European Commission 'Green Deal', the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) 'New Deal for Nature', and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) 'Global Green New Deal'. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has stated that 'Supported by investments in green technologies, sustainable solutions and new businesses […] The European Green Deal is our new growth strategy. It will help us cut emissions while creating jobs'.[4] Typical of all these 'deals' are claims of coordinating and organising stakeholders, having civil society and government work with, or more accurately for, 'industry', with promises of economic growth, jobs and climate stability. Similar ideas are touted under the term 'stakeholder capitalism', the theme of Davos 2020. In this 'new' era of corporate capitalism the environmental non-governmental organisations also have their role to play.

A prime example of the strategy in operation is the capture of the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature, which has fully committed itself to corporate capitalism since appointing Pavan Sukdev as its President in 2017. He was developing new financial instruments for Deutsche Bank, before heading a UNEP backed project on 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity' (TEEB) with goals of capturing value and mainstreaming the economics of Nature (Spash 2011). Cynical financiers, out to make as much money as possible from bits of paper they transfer from one to another for profit, have been keen to join the environmental bandwagon: expanding emissions trading, wetland banking and biodiversity offsetting. Enter the UNEP Finance Initiative (UNEP FI). This is a partnership of the UN with the global financial sector. Its mission is to promote 'sustainable finance', which includes 'hardwiring biodiversity and ecosystem services into finance' (UNEP Finance Initiative 2010).

4. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en Accessed 11 January 2020.

The latest project, entitled 'The Net Zero Asset Alliance', boasts being led by asset owners representing more than US$ 2 trillion (UNEP Finance Initiative 2020: 8), in a network controlling US$ 4 trillion.[5] The public face is fronted by Sukdev and Christiana Figueres, former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). She, Sukdev and WWF are meant to provide the corporate executives, bankers, billionaires and financiers with an air of respectability and environmental concern. After all, they desperately need it, given that investor returns, or more simply making money grow exponentially, has nothing to do with sustaining anything, let alone Nature, biodiversity or ecosystems.

As Schoppek explains in this issue of *Environmental Values*, neoliberalism was selected by powerful actors as conforming with their view of the world. It has been institutionalised in rules and regulations helping form identities and strategies. As a hegemonic discourse it promotes ideas of meritocracy, the individual as an 'entrepreneurial self' (innovative, independent and responsible for all that goes wrong in their lives), utility maximisation, commodification, economic efficiency, and the market economy as the sole legitimate institution for social organisation. This dominant economic imaginary helps embed the system and ensure its reproduction. Forms of environmentalism that engage in the rhetoric of sustainable growth then evidence a Gramscian passive revolution. That is, a top down strategically designed alternative to radical environmentalism is offered to maintain business as usual. A successful passive revolution absorbs external critique, transforms it and stabilises existing power relations. The aim is to silence more critical perspectives and supress power disrupting alternatives. Ecological crisis is therefore altered into an opportunity for growth and profiteering via commodification and financialisation of Nature.

Shoppek then questions the extent to which even the apparently more radical degrowth movement has the potential to be co-opted. Her core argument is that degrowth contains elements that are counter-hegemonic but also those that are sub-hegemonic. She illustrates the point with two degrowth positions identified in the work of Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018). That of a politically informed progressive left, supporting an anarchistic continual struggle for freedom, is argued to be counter-hegemonic. This is described as supplying a structural critique in addition to the kind of moral perspective found under the second position, termed self-sufficiency discourses. This latter position, as advanced in Germany by Niko Paech (e.g., Paech 2017, 2012), is argued to be compatible with neoliberal thought and so sub-hegemonic. Its failure is due to the over-emphasis on individual action that actually supports spreading the concept of an 'entrepreneurial self' (e.g., the sharing economy) while ignoring the structure of the economic system. This encourages the creation of organisations that substitute for the role of the State in the care of those at the bottom, and so reduce the potency of those individuals contesting the system

5. https://www.unepfi.org/net-zero-alliance/ Accessed 11 January 2020.

and its ever-growing inequities. Thus we might reflect upon how a neoliberal consumerist society, such as the UK, encourages the role of charity shops that assuage the guilt of the consuming middle classes while substituting elements of a Welfare State, and doing nothing to address the causes of poverty.

The importance of a structural systems perspective is also identified by Boscov-Ellen. He highlights the failure of environmental ethicists (e.g. Dale Jamieson, Simon Caney, Peter Singer and Henry Shue) to address the systemic aspects of human induced climate change and as a result to over-emphasise the role of individual agency and responsibility in debating who is meant to take action and what action they should take. Environmental ethicists are criticised for focusing on acts of consumption and their related emissions, ignoring production and producers, and so reducing humans to their role as consumers with ethical preferences. Historical and contextual understanding of poverty, wealth and inequity are lacking. There are also some clear strands of liberal political thought behind several of the ethicists' positions, and an inherent conservatism (e.g., the unquestioned permanence of Nation States and capitalism). The supposed solutions of the likes of Jamieson and Singer adopt neoliberal polices of pricing and trading carbon despite their flaws (Spash 2010). In contrast, once the existing social and economic structure is identified as a causal determinant of ecological crises then attention shifts to an ethical responsibility to change that system.

As Boscov-Ellen remarks, current ethical debate has produced 'a framing that dovetails perfectly with the longstanding (and successful) efforts of liberal governments and corporations to individualise responsibility for systemic ills, even as they single-mindedly pursue growth'. He goes on to develop the case for undertaking radical change in economic and political structures as a moral imperative. This would require expanding collective causal responsibility for harm to account for structural mechanisms that limit and shape behaviour. The emphasis is then placed on solidarity, as part of a collective, seeking political and economic transformation, rather than on individual actions.

Identifying the organisations and institutions reproducing the political and economic structure is necessary in the process of seeking radical change in those structures. Corporations are obviously key in modern society and their activities are directly linked to global greenhouse gas emission. In recent years the term 'carbon majors' has become associated with the 100 corporations most responsible for creating and perpetuating the climate crisis, as noted by Boscov-Ellen and picked up as the central focus of the paper by Grasso and Vladimirova. These top 100 polluters produced over 70% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gases (1988–2015), with just 25 producing 51%. The top 100 include 43 state owned or government run corporations.[6] Grasso and Vladimirova regard these corporations as moral agents whose activities

6. 'The **highest emitting companies since 1988** that are investor-owned include: ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, Chevron, Peabody, Total, and BHP Billiton. Key state-owned companies include

they review in terms of their having violated the negative responsibility of doing no harm to others. Beyond a consequentialist causal aspect, they invoke a more stringent set of requirements related to appraising agents' intentions, something they refer to as 'moral responsibility', which seems directed more towards assessing culpability (the phrase seems somewhat misleading, given that causal responsibility is also 'moral'). The authors then assess this culpability in terms of corporate responsibility for human induced climate change, with specific reference to a priori knowledge of creating harm, awareness of doing so over a long time frame, capacity to avoid harm, denial of the truth (amounting to spreading lies in their own interest), and self enrichment by their harmful actions. Having been found guilty as charged what is the outcome?

Grasso and Vladimirova make the case for corrective justice involving decarbonisation and reparation. The former would involve gradually reducing emissions to zero, with some notion that an increasing supply of 'cleaner energy' will 'avoid disrupting the global energy demand' (something that seems highly unlikely given the scale and extent of fossil fuels in the economy). The latter is, on rather unclear grounds, restricted to corporations relinquishing part of their accumulated wealth from activities related to creating harm. Reparations are discussed in terms of restitution, compensation and disgorgement (relinquishing historically ill-gotten gains). There are perhaps more questions raised than answers given in the ensuing discussion, e.g. ideas of not endangering the wealth of the rich, not pursuing shareholders' or employees' gains and concerns over protecting pension funds. Most problematic of all is the claim that actions should 'not financially prevent carbon majors from engaging in the just transition required by the duty of decarbonisation'. This idea of 'just transition' is itself problematic and is employed to justify the preservation of carbon majors in order to avoid being too disruptive to the 'socio-economic system'. The contradiction is that the system and its capital accumulating corporate form is the problem that needs to be addressed and this cannot be avoided. The idea of a 'just transition' appears to offer a get out of jail free card to the corporations who will (as they are doing) argue for offsetting, subsidies for transition, waiting for new technologies and maintaining business as usual for as long as possible.

An interesting question that arises in light of the discussion by Grasso and Vladimirova is why stop with carbon emissions? These same one hundred corporations produced 91% of global industrial emissions in 2015 (Griffin 2017: 7), and would therefore be culpable on the same grounds for the plethora of associated harms to human health and the environment. Grasso and Vladimirova have made a strong case for recognising that these corporations engage in deliberate cost-shifting, and are not innocent victims of unforeseen externalities that can be blamed on markets having the wrong prices. If all the other

Saudi Aramco, Gazprom, National Iranian Oil, Coal India, Pemex, and CNPC (PetroChina).' (Griffin 2017: 8, emphasis original).

cost-shifting activities of corporations were taken into account, the grounds for maintaining such institutions would seem to disappear.

In practice, the attempts by corporations to avoid any claims of wrongdoing in polluting activities have been extensive and have involved public relations firms being hired to strategise the undermining of science and scientists (Oreskes and Conway 2010). Responsibility for reparations is frequently shifted to the public purse, and 'solutions' displaced into the future via technologies, often requiring public funding both in research and development and (where realised) implementation. This technological strategy is evident in the increasing promotion of geoengineering for solar radiation management and/or greenhouse gas removal (GGR): e.g., direct air capture, enhanced rock weathering, and bioenergy with carbon capture and storage. The related 'negative emissions' approach is totally embedded in the hundreds of scenarios run by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).[7] This allows business as usual with no reduction of greenhouse gases, and indeed their potential increase, because they are assumed to be removable after emission by application of an appropriate technological fix. Cox, Spence and Pidgeon note how media coverage has created a discourse on geoengineering that removes issues of justices, equity, fairness and distribution, while framing it as an 'essential' action in the face of the climate emergency. Similarly, in mitigation scenarios informing policy, GGR is not an additional policy measure but is rather modelled as critical for stabilising global average climate temperature at international target levels. Cox, Spence and Pidgeon are concerned to probe into the content of the related discourse and debate as occurring amongst experts (defined as those with pre-existing knowledge and opinions). Their research involves interviews with 17 people from the UK and USA, the majority of whom represent academia and the remainder the private sector, NGOs and policy/regulation. The two themes they find across the interviews are 'risk' and 'responsibility'.

In terms of risk, GGR is described by interviewees as part of a 'portfolio' of measures, in contrast to the IPCC, media and policy framings. Reduced energy demand and increased renewable energy supply are regarded as coming first and foremost. Urgency (i.e., doing something immediately), and the need to avoid dangerous climate change, support regarding GGR as essential, but this discourse is also noted by some interviewees as being top-down, expert driven and potentially dangerous for democracy. A classic risk and portfolio investment managers' approach then raises the question of who gets to decide on the risks and the investments? This leads into how societal decisions are made, and an implicit technocracy appears to surface with the key players mentioned by interviewees being experts, policy-makers and (high emissions) industry. Although mistrust of the latter two was also evident, a naïve pragmatism

7. Kevin Anderson (2015: 899) notes that 344 of the 400 IPCC scenarios assume the successful and large-scale uptake of negative-emission technologies.

appeared in a readiness to acquiesce to the wealth of corporations and their power to get action, summarised as 'working with powerful institutions is more pragmatic than working against them'. GGR then offers a potential means for corporations and governments to opt-out of actual emissions reductions, and plays the role of a 'mitigation deterrent'. GGR measures, such as widespread use of Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS), were also seen as likely to have unjust outcomes, due to their being undertaken to maintain the lifestyles of the rich and powerful while being imposed on vulnerable communities who suffer negative consequences (e.g., land grabbing).

Such pragmatic arguments contrast strongly with the moral arguments against corporations of Grasso and Vladimirova, as well as with the case for revolutionary change made by Boscov-Ellen, and both link to the need for addressing the social and economic structure highlighted by Shoppek. In the discussion by Cox, Spence and Pidgeon these conflicting positions appear as a core aspect of debate about human induced climate change, where the main question becomes the extent to which 'strategies should aim to work within existing incumbent capitalist systems'. GGR then indicates failure to adequately challenge the system and instead to support top-down 'solutions' that maintain existing structure, power and wealth and so become part of another ecological modernist passive revolution. This appears as technological optimism, claiming sustainability and economic growth are compatible, and the legitimisation of corporations as profit seeking organisations and their beneficiaries as justified in their accumulation of wealth and power. There is today an on-going struggle for how environmental issues are to be perceived, described and explained, which determines what knowledge and which voices are deemed admissible to the policy debate.

The construction of knowledge and what knowing something means is a longstanding issue in philosophy. The term co-creation (mentioned by Cox et al. and Mancilla Garcia et al.) has become popular of late, and it covers a range of ideas that have for some decades been part of debates around participatory decision process and post-normal science. Mancilla Garcia et al. highlight the roles of process and relations, epistemology and ontology, and empiricism. Whether the social process involved is important to conceptualisation has divided philosophers, with the implications extending from the extremes that knowledge requires total exclusion of values (in a naïve objectivist methodology), to knowledge being a totally cultural and socially determined perspective (under a radical relativist position) (Sayer 1992). Both these extremes assume flat ontologies (the former empiricist and latter actualist) without attention to underlying structure. When trying to identify what lies behind experience and actualised events, and indeed to understand our experiences, what come to the fore is the role of non-empiricist conceptualisation and inference (e.g. deductive, abductive, retroductive), along with metaphysical concepts. The basis for the validity given to knowledge claims remains contentious, but what the

papers on climate change in this issue hold in common is their identification of the same fundamental social and economic structures in human society as being central to the reproduction of the ongoing ecological crisis.

That the discourse of the environmental movement has been failing, captured and adopted by a 'new environmental pragmatism', is more evident every day with the spread of financialisation and commodification of Nature, often legitimised by environmental NGOs acting as fronts for corporate interests. For corporate capitalism the environmental crisis is not about the dangers posed by collapsing biophysical systems, but the threat of environmentalism to the growth economy and capitalism's continuing existence. An escalation of attempts to reinforce the status quo means more passive revolutions, orchestrated by the incumbent leaders of the capital accumulating systems, who adopt even the apparently radical discourses of urgency, emergency and crises. Calls for immediate action without direction play straight into the hands of those seeking to maintain their hegemonic economic and social power. Those seeking social ecological transformation increasingly face the stark choice of either conforming to or opposing the structures reproducing social, ecological and economic crises. The former promises a technological future dependent upon experts and the noblesse oblige of billionaires, corporate interests and their protectors. It offers those living well today the comforting vision of a system that maintains their position in an increasingly divided and divisive world. The papers in this issue of *Environmental Values* set out a range of ethical arguments and concerns that bring corporate capitalism into question or oppose it, and reflect upon ethical responses to its ongoing infliction of harm on the innocent. They make it clear that conformity to the system that produced the crisis will not deliver the necessary revolutionary social ecological transformation.

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