

# **Capitalism Eats Greens**

Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

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Capitalism has responded in a variety of ways to the criticisms and opposition of Greens, both reformist and radical. This response has fallen into two categories: the velvet glove (capitalism is and can be green) and the iron fist (jailing, physical intimidation and the murder of green activists).

Many greens have become part of the problem: capitalism, rather than the solution: green anarchist communism. This is because their lack of radical class analysis leads them to believe that capitalism can be reformed and made green through strategies such as technological fixes e.g. electronic cars, green consumerism and the big myth of green/sustainable growth. More radical greens are prey to other theoretical cul-de-sacs such as spirituality or electoral politics. Technophobia is another pitfall as well as misanthropy, tendencies exhibited by parts of Earth First, Green Anarchist and Fifth Estate.

## **Waste**

One of the greens' central criticisms of capitalism is the amount of waste it produces. In order of priority, the best option to tackle waste is waste reduction, followed by re-use, then recycling, with landfill burial and incineration off the green scale. Unsurprisingly, capital has promoted recycling and landfill/incineration because they don't tackle the fundamental causes of the problem which is that waste is endemic to a system of production based on the domination, exploitation and hence destruction of the planet and its people. As far as capitalism is concerned, the earth and humans only exist in order that they can be converted from being 'useless', non-profit-making into products that can be sold for a profit. So people are only useful as workers or consumers. Land must be used for agricultural or industrial purposes rather than being left as 'wasteland' or 'wilderness'. Capitalist production is therefore necessarily wasteful in terms of energy and resources because it needs to continually transform resources into profit-making products.

Reduction and re-use of products consume up to five times less energy than recycling and involve a lower level of technology. For example, compare returnable bottles which are 20% energy efficient with bottle banks which are only 5% efficient. Industry and government also promote landfill burial and incineration as 'green' answers. Burial is obviously a form of tipping and pollution. Incineration puts dangerous pollutants such as toxic dioxins into the air and produces toxic ash buried in landfill sites. Many of the new generation of 'clean burn' incinerators beloved of many local authorities also produce heat energy; they are not clean or green, however. Incinerators undermine recycling and waste reduction because they need so much waste fed into them to generate electricity efficiently.

## **Plastic**

Most plastic packaging is obviously wasteful and unnecessary; it is used once and then discarded. Recycling is too expensive to be a viable option in that it is cheaper and easier to make plastic from fresh inputs. The industry seeks to hide this non-green reality by opening up new markets with 'recycled plastic' while new plastic production continues. Plastics that cannot be recycled are incinerated, producing electricity.

Aluminium is another example of the shortcomings of recycling. It is generally extracted from bauxite ore which requires huge amounts of electricity, hence great waste and pollution.

Economically, the industry can only function through being subsidised by energy utilities and governments. For example, in France it pays a quarter of the price for electricity as the rest of industry which is an eighth of what the ordinary French consumer pays. Each ton of aluminium extracted results in the production of at least a ton of toxic red mud made up of metallic oxides and other contaminants which pollute ground and surface water. Recycling is only a partial answer. It takes about six percent as much energy to produce energy from scrap as it does to make it from ore. In 1990 over five million tons, nearly a quarter of world output, were produced from recycled aluminium. However, recycling cannot eliminate primary production and recycling statistics can be very misleading. In America, for example, drinks cans account for most recycling. Although half are recycled, the other half are thrown away, constituting a total which exceeds that of the world use of aluminium by all but the top seven countries. Therefore, recycling is of limited value. We need to consider both cutting down the overall use of these products as well as the re-use of those produced. Refillable drinks containers such as bottles would use a tenth or less of the energy as cans, even if all aluminium cans were recycled.

## **Soft Soap**

One soft soap tactic used by industry and government is 'greenballs': money spent on PR to extol how 'green' they are. One example is Shell's famous ad about their invisible pipeline under the Snowdonia National Park. Another is Scott Paper's (the Andrex manufacturers) £3 million advertisement claiming that, "for every tree we harvest we grow one or more in its place". This farming uses far more energy than paper recycling and requires pesticides to be sprayed from the air, polluting a wide area. In addition, the trees they supposedly plant are no replacement for natural woodlands which are disappearing whilst unsightly conifer plantations are expanding.

Another soft tactic is to push the line that "we're all on the same side really" or "social responsibility is good business and good business is social responsibility", as Bob Reid, chair of Shell said in 1990. Business tries to convince critics of their sincerity' by throwing money at them. In the early 1990s Shell was giving £200,000 a year to conservation groups. As a British Coal representative said, "if you build up good relationships with your neighbours then they're much more tolerant when you have an incident". I think we've seen that Shell accomplished that and Exxon hasn't as Shell managed to get off lightly after it spilt 156 tons of crude oil in the Mersey in 1989. As an Environmental Council professor put it, "Semantics are terribly important. Don't talk about 'incinerators', call them 'high temperature thermal destructors'. Don't talk about 'waste dumping', talk about 'waste management'".

## **Sustainable Growth**

The idea that economic growth can be ecological is a myth, merely dressing up the capitalist ethic of 'grow or die' in green clothing. According to this argument capitalist wealth creation is the cure for all ills such as global poverty, rather than their cause. Green growth is no different from any other form of expansion. It also faces the barrier of increasing negative trade-offs and insurmountable limiting factors. Savings on waste and built-in obsolescence may provide the wherewithal for the re-direction of existing resources, but further expansion can only be attained by putting even more earth under concrete, open cast excavator, the plough, or impounded water.

The human-constructed economy and the technologies that serve it are totally dependent on the natural economy whose ecological systems represent the biophysical foundation of all wealth. Direct benefits include foodstuffs and medicine whilst indirect benefits include the capture, conversion and storage of solar energy, the disposal of wastes and the recycling of nutrients and the generation and maintenance of soil fertility.

There are intrinsic limits to the resources humans can take from the earth on a sustainable basis. The transformation of energy and raw materials by people generates wastes which return to the air, soil and water. There are equivalent limits to what the earth can sustainably re-assimilate of these, due to the size of the earth, its resources and entropy. In other words, all energy usage is one-way; ash cannot be relit from the ashes.

The claim that new growth will be cleaner depends on the efficacy of clever gadgetry fitted to polluting processes. Technological gadgets merely shift the problem, often at the expense of greater energy and material inputs, therefore increasing pollution. Catalytic converters for cars, for example, cost more money and energy, generate new pollutants and fail to tackle more serious problems such as carbon dioxide emissions. The only practical way to prevent the release of carbon, a main cause of the Greenhouse Effect, is to burn less wood and coal. Similarly, the only way to control the build-up of methane is to limit the amount of cattle ranching and rice growing. There are no easy technological fixes.

## **Iron Fist**

Corporations have also organised politically with the Right. The Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute is a group of right-wing think tanks with members in America, Australia and Europe. They oppose state regulation and argue for 'free market environmentalism', i.e. the privatisation of resources. CEI work with the Wise Use movement which is a coalition of ranchers, miners, farmers etc. with right-wing activists corporate front groups. Their explicit aim is the destruction of the environmental movement. They have gained support in resource-dependent areas around the world. Wise Use have exploited the environmental movements general neglect of social concerns and concentration on lobbying the people at the top rather than prioritising grass roots activism. Business has responded to the Greens 'success' in getting environmental laws passed; they have bought politicians, funded 'independent' think tanks and corporate front groups and spent huge amounts of money on public relations. O'Dwyers PR Services, the main PR flagship, called environmentalism "the life and death battle of the 1990s".

Capital has also sought to marginalise and physically attack the environmental movement. Greens have been labelled extremists, terrorists, communists, fascists and religious fanatics with a hidden agenda of 'totalitarian one world government'. In Britain during the 1994 campaign against the dumping at sea of Shell's Brent Spar oil platform, the energy minister Tim Eggar accused Greenpeace of environmental terrorism. The Tories have also labelled anti-roads campaigners as terrorists and fascist. Such scapegoating justifies surveillance, harassment and violence by companies and the State. Recent high-profile murders of greens have included those of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni in Nigeria and the assassination of Chico Mendes the Brazilian anti-logging leader.

Environmentalists now commonly face legal intimidation world-wide in the form of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). They rarely come to court and are designed to

frighten people into silence. In Britain, the McLibel case is an example of SLAPP that backfired. Other examples are government legal action against the M11 and Twyford Down campaigners and provisions in the Criminal Justice Act which penalise intent rather than action.

## **Life and Death**

The response of companies and governments to environmentalism has shown that they know it is a life and death issue, part of the class struggle between Capital and the majority of humanity, the working class. It is vital that class struggle libertarians and environmentalists argue and act together in the fight for an equal human society which is in harmony with the rest of nature. Hopefully this process has started to happen. For example, Earth First in the US has realised that their fight was not with logging workers but with companies and government and stopped their anti-worker tree spiking. In Britain, we have the joint actions of the Liverpool dockers and the anti-roads campaigners to show us the way.

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Retrieved on May 13, 2013 from [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)  
Published in *Organise!* Issue 45 — Spring 1997.

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