

Trashing the Planet for Profit

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Global Economy](#),
[Media Disinformation](#)

Introduction

Before I began this essay I read through some of my past forays that mentioned climate change and capitalism, the first I think, being in 2006 where I opined in a piece on the 'War on Terror':

Perhaps the impending climate catastrophe as well as the genocidal actions of the US will force us to finally start thinking and acting 'outside of the box' but without a clear idea of where we are heading or how to get there, currently the situation looks dire. — [WOT is to be done?](#) 2 November, 2006

In the intervening years, things have gotten even more dire on pretty much every front. It appears that the world's political and business elite are even more entrenched inside *their* box. Except, we do know what has to be done, so why, in the face of the obvious, do we not act to forestall catastrophe?

Pessimism, Progress...

For the most part, us lefties are optimists. We believe in the future, in progress, that things will get better, eventually. That the ludicrous idea that capitalism is the 'end of history', that in spite of its relentless propaganda, and notwithstanding the defeat of the first socialist experiments, that there is a future beyond capitalism, conditional of course, that we come together to fight for it, as there's nothing inevitable about it.

But as things stand, it may well be that the human race is not included in that future. Bacteria maybe, but not us.

Personally, I've always been an optimist, that in the future, eventually things *would* get better. Progress, revolution. Not in my lifetime perhaps but eventually we would move beyond capitalism to a sane society. One not driven by greed and short-term gain for the few. Until that is, the reality of climate change hit home, but more on this later.

And the Personal...

After my father died when I was 10, my mother got together with a family friend and he became not exactly a replacement for my father but let's say, almost, for around 12 years (he died in 2016). Like most of my family and on both sides, he was also a lefty. A talented person. Royal College of Art, a designer, an actor, singer, song writer and lecturer, and a communist his entire life (he was 85 when he died). Like me, he was an optimist. He believed in a better future, better than this miserable present; until a year or so before his death that is (I think he starved himself to death because of his change of heart).

I surmise that what brought about this change was his belief that it was already too late, we had reached the proverbial 'tipping point' and there was no going back. He believed that the changes wrought on the biosphere by 200 years of industrial capitalism were now irreversible. We were on the slide toward catastrophe and there was nothing we could do about it given the stranglehold the 1% have on the world. Perhaps even worse, that no matter what we did now or in the future, it was already too late to halt, let alone reverse, catastrophic (to us) climate change.

Trashing the Planet, one plastic bottle at a time

When I was a child, in fact into my teens, containers came in only three types; glass/ceramic; paper/wood/cardboard and metal. All were recyclable and for most part, they were. Our milk was delivered to the front door in glass bottles, by our Coop milkman, Billy. There was no deposit on them, we left the (clean) empties for Billy to collect, returned to the bottling plant where they were washed and reused, at least three times before being recycled. And as a teenager I worked every Saturday on that Coop milk float, horse-drawn, would you believe. The horse knew the route better than we did. It knew at which house we stopped for tea and chocolate digestive biscuits and when to move on. Billy rarely touched the horse and I *never* did, I was frightened of it, it liked to bite.

And we bought our fruit and veg in paper bags from the local greengrocer, not a hundred meters from where we lived. Ditto the bread, from the bakery, fresh baked twice a day, one hundred meters past the greengrocers.

Nostalgia? Perhaps that's a small part of it but the recent [statistic](#) that in a few years time there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish goes to the very heart of an economic system that can only see profit and worse, can't see beyond today, beyond short-term gain, even if its actions threaten its own future as a class, as a system. Insane? You bet!

But as I've written many, many times before ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) to name a few), the 1% think they can survive the coming conflagration, that their money, power, technology and weapons will enable them to ride out the coming storm, sacrificing the defenceless of the planet in the name of profit.

The problem is that we are witnessing exponential, negative feedback, so what was predicted say 10 years ago as a 'breathing space' of 30 or 50 years in which to take steps to halt the slide is now predicted to be 'only' 10 years and no doubt soon it will be upon us. No years! How can one be positive in the face of these revelations without entering a state of denial or resignation?

Even more repulsive, the 1% have no problem sacrificing vast swathes of humanity to preserve their privilege and the rule of capital. The 'other' are after all, 'surplus to requirement'. A vast army of surplus labour, global in scope, not needed by the privileged few. And the effects of climate change are happening now, never mind ten years time, in places like Bangladesh and Puerto Rico. Firstly, by doing nothing to change the economic system that's caused it and secondly by doing nothing where climate change has already caused unimaginable disasters and suffering.

We can't say we haven't been warned

56 years ago, in 1962, Rachel Carson wrote 'Silent Spring', about the disastrous effects of

synthetic pesticides on the environment and on us. For her trouble:

“Carson was violently assailed by threats of lawsuits and derision, including suggestions that this meticulous scientist was a “hysterical woman” unqualified to write such a book. A huge counterattack was organized and led by Monsanto, Velsicol, American Cyanamid — indeed, the whole chemical industry — duly supported by the [US] Agriculture Department as well as the more cautious in the media.” - [Climate Change: World War III by another name?](#) 4 December 2008, By William Bowles

Over 50 years later climate scientists have suffered comparable attacks, with the sociopath Trump, who far from being the exception to capitalist rule, actually personifies it in all its naked barbarity. The only difference is that Trump publicly avows that he doesn't give a damn! What we witness with Trump's irrational attacks is a system at the end of its tether so-to-speak. Enraged by its failure to achieve total hegemony over the planet, it lashes out like some wounded beast. Unless stopped, it threatens nuclear Armageddon to add to its list of genocidal crimes against the planet and its peoples.

Is it too late?

But what are the chances of overthrowing capitalism before it's too late to stop, let alone reverse the changes wrought by this insane system? Can organisations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, and indeed, a whole slew of 'green' pressure groups, force the capitalists to reverse their suicidal trajectory?

Not until they stop avoiding the issue of confronting capitalism itself rather than the 'morally uplifting' but ineffectual route of the personal act e.g., not buying stuff in plastic bottles. Not that, as individuals, we shouldn't stop buying stuff in plastic bottles but that *real* change can only come through collective actions, as a class that collectively opposes capitalism and furthermore advocates an alternative way of living. For myself, I don't see any other alternative than to some form of socialism.

Thus the current drive against the production of plastic bottles once more puts the onus on us, or the current fad around plastic-lined paper coffee cups (all ten billion of them) again, it puts the onus on us. But there is no call to ban their production or ban the production of the endless stream of plastic cartons, wrappings and boxes that are filling up the oceans and our waste tips. Make us pay for it instead with a levy (tax) on their sale. A tax no doubt that will be used to wage ever more wars on the planet. And we have to face the fact that we can't have our cake and eat it, when it's the planet and its peoples that paying the price for our useless and unhappy lives, in spite of the gadgets and 4K TVs.

As ever, the public and the planet pay the price for capitalist, profit-driven production. But ultimately *it is* actually our responsibility but it's of a different order than being obedient but 'responsible' consumers by recycling this and that. It's by tackling the issue at its root, capitalism. This is a qualitatively different struggle that requires not individual actions (though they are important), but organised, collective action to transform the way we make our living; our economic mode of production.

Moreover, it *will* require sacrifice on our part. We *will* have to decide how we want to live our lives. I fear however that by the time we decide that going into debt to buy all the crap that ends up sitting in cupboards unused across the nation (allegedly 30% of it), it *will* be too late

for us to do anything about it.

What is to be Done?

So, is it hopeless? Everything in me cries out, no, it's not hopeless! We can do something about it before it's too late. But what exactly, are the somethings that we need to do?

I think some of the initial somethings are self-evident, well at least to me. For example, the existing environmental/green groups need to wake up and smell the coffee and join with what's left of our left and in turn, what's left of our left needs to wake and smell the coffee too and put a stop to its imperial thinking and stop telling the rest of the planet what to do and concentrate on the problem of how to deal with the contradiction of being privileged citizens of the Imperialist world and at the same time calling ourselves socialists. Furthermore, what's left of our left needs to stop cannibalising itself by spending most of its time attacking the various left factions and focus instead on tackling the real enemy, capitalism.

There is another issue which I fear is probably even more difficult to deal with and that's our understanding (or lack of it) of what happens outside the imperial 'bubble' we live in. A friend of mine pointed it out to me the other day, noting that I had the advantage of having lived on three continents, including Africa. I had, at least in theory, the advantage of knowing what it was like to experience the reality of a world shaped by imperialism, one that has enabled me to step outside that bubble of imperial privilege, that influences even the most allegedly radical lefty.

It comes down to the ability to empathise, or not, with another person's reality. To be able to put one's self in another person's shoes. To see and experience their reality rather than impose our own onto theirs. Hence an alleged lefty, indeed a 'professional' lefty like Tariq Ali, who said in 2012:

"He [Assad] has to be pushed out" - [Assad must go to save Syria from intervention](#), RT, 15 February 2012

By what right does Ali say this? The issue really is not about whether Assad should or shouldn't go but about Ali's almost divine right to lay down the law about another country from his privileged position as a citizen of Empire. The fact that he said it allegedly in the context that it would *avert* Western intervention if Assad stepped aside, totally misses the point, for *if* Assad was to go, it would mean that Imperialism had *succeeded* in its objective *without* the need for intervention! Duh! Ali attempted to rationalise his position by stating that:

"[Ali] believes that once Assad falls, the new government will keep good relations with Iran, because this will be in the interest of the new democratic government." - [Tariq Ali says Assad has to go: I'm depressed - no, I'm outraged](#), By William Bowles, 15 February 2012

I responded, 'What new democratic government?' Total wishful thinking on Ali's part as it assumes that that's what the West wants, a democratic government and should Assad step aside, that's what Syria would get. Duh! Talk about self-delusion!

It exemplifies the contradiction of being an alleged socialist at home and enjoying the privilege of being part of the Empire's intellectual elite and paid very well thank you very much, whilst dictating to Syria what it should and shouldn't do. I fail to see the distinction between Ali's arrogance and that of the West, that called for *exactly* the same thing! Assad has to go!

Furthermore, it reveals the gulf that has to be bridged between us and the proverbial 'them', the 'other'. No mean stretch. It also illustrates the problem we face here, at home, in the belly of the beast of coming to terms with our responsibilities to the planet that we have raped for the past 500 years and continue to rape in order to preserve our (relative) privilege.

Perhaps this in part explains why collectively, we refuse to accept responsibility for the state of the planet. Yes, ultimately, it's the economic system, capitalism that's doing the damage but surely it's time we also accept responsibility for our role in maintaining an unsustainable economic system, a system that in the short term we all benefit from.

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