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## *Our Pass-Fail Moment*

### *Livable Ecology, Capitalism, Occupy and What Is To Be Done*

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#### **Abstract**

*The ecological crisis is the leading issue of “our or any time” posing grave threats to a decent and democratic future. If the environmental catastrophe isn’t forestalled, “everything else we’re talking about won’t matter” (Noam Chomsky). Like other issues leftists cite as major developments of the last half-century, the environmental crisis is intimately bound up with numerous other deep changes (growing inequality, authoritarian neoliberalism, corporate globalization, U.S. imperial expansion, and more) and grounded in the imperatives of capital and the profits system. Tackling the crisis in a meaningful way will bring numerous related and collateral benefits (including significant opportunities for socially useful and necessary work/employment) beyond and alongside environmental survival. To prioritize ecology is not to demote or delay radical social reconstruction. It means the elevation and escalation of the red project. It is highly unlikely that the crisis can be solved within the framework of capitalism.*

*This article was originally delivered as a Keynote Address at The Rouge Forum 2012 OCCUPY EDUCATION! Class Conscious Pedagogies and Social Change at Miami University in Oxford, OH.*



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I guess I'm here to put a little green in your rouge. The title of my talk (I hope you all appreciate the education-related wording) is "Our Pass-Fail Moment: Livable Ecology, Capitalism, Occupy, and What is to be Done."

### **Pissing in the Wind**

Let me start with a quotation from a brilliant radical philosopher named John Sonbanmatsu. The quotation comes from a personal e-mail in which John was responding to something I'd said last year about progress I'd seen on the left with the labor uprising in Wisconsin and the emergence of Occupy Wall Street. The response from Sonbanmatsu was so profound I printed it off and taped it onto a bookshelf next to my desk.

"What's striking to me, though," John wrote, "is how much extraordinary social progress has been made, in some corners of the globe, toward sexual equality for gays and lesbians and liberal rights for women, while at the same time there has been zero progress--zero--toward challenging wage slavery, the power of monopoly capital, or the national security state. Nor," John wrote, "...nor is there any meaningful progress being made toward the #1 issue of our or any time, which is the ecological crisis (including mass species extinctions and global warming)...to me," John wrote, "the Left is just pissing in the wind. Remember the late-1980s, when the most important issue for the American left was freeing Mumia Abu Jamal? There is a psychotic element," John concluded, "to the way we focus our energies, or rather dissociate from the fundamental problems confronting humanity and the other living creatures." There's no small truth in that statement.

### **The Last Half Century**

Lately I've been talking to a number of my fellow middle-aged leftists about the biggest underlying changes we've seen in American life and society during our lifetimes

My portside cohorts tend to sort the changes they mention into three basic categories: Good, Bad, and Neutral or Ambiguous. The *good changes* mentioned generally relate to civil rights and identity, to historic defeats of bigotry and discrimination won by the Civil Rights, women's and gay rights movements. Other good things get mentioned – consumer safety laws, clean air and water laws, abolition of the death penalty in most states, the rise and spread of organic foods.

The *neutral or ambiguous* stuff that gets mentioned include globalization, the rise of the personal computer and the Internet, and the end of the Cold War. Lefties I know tend to be split or neutral on whether these developments are ultimately liberating or oppressive from a Marxist perspective. Many seem to think they are neither good nor bad and that it's up to social and political action to harness the Internet and globalization for positive, democratic purposes.

The *bad stuff* comes in a long list. The highlights, perhaps I should say the low-lights, include:

- The rise of a deeply racist mass incarceration and criminal branding and surveillance complex that puts more than 3 million Americans behind bars each day and saddles more than 1 in 3 black adult males with the crippling lifelong mark of a felony record.

- The permanent, structural nature of unemployment for millions of Americans – a livable wage employment vacuum so deep that the current economic crisis can seem worse than the Great Depression of the 1930s because this time we sense – all too correctly – that most of the jobs that have been shredded are never coming back.
- A concentration of wealth and power so great that the top 1 percent now owns more than 40 percent of the nation’s net worth, more than 57 percent of the nation’s financial wealth, and a probably larger share of the nation’s elected officials – this in a country where the bottom 40 percent owns just 0.3 percent of the wealth, essentially nothing.
- A concentration of wealth so great that six inheritors of the WalMart fortune, six Walton heirs, together possess as much wealth as the bottom 30 percent of the country.
- A de-unionization of the American working class so steep that the percentage of workers enrolled in unions has fallen from more than 40 in the early 1960s to less than 10 percent today.
- The eclipse of democracy in a neoliberal state where business power has not merely the dominant political shadow cast across society (as John Dewey put it nearly a century ago) but a dark cloud that envelopes society and pushes both of the reigning political organizations (hardly even real parties anymore) so far to the right of the populace that it becomes hard to see the U.S. as anything but a corporate plutocracy.
- The disappearance of any single credible military deterrent to U.S. global military power and the spread of American and western imperialism to parts of the world previously considered off limits.
- The deepening exhaustion of the once easily accessible natural resources that fed the long industrial era and whose exploitation underpinned the remarkable expansion of Western and global economic activity after 1945.

Now, for some reason, in these discussions, it’s always left to me to mention the biggest negative development of all. I am referring of course to the emergence of catastrophic anthropogenic global warming and a related broader environmental apocalypse that threatens a decent livable future for humanity and other sentient beings. According to new research released three weeks ago by the science journal *Nature*, humanity is now facing an imminent threat of extinction—a threat caused by its reckless exploitation of the natural environment. The report reveals that our planet's biosphere is steadily and ever more rapidly approaching a tipping point,” meaning that all of the planet’s ecosystems are nearing sudden and irreversible change that will not be conducive to human life. “The data suggests that there will be a reduction in biodiversity and severe impacts on much of what we depend on to sustain our quality of life, including... fisheries, agriculture, forest products and clean water. This could happen within just a few generations.” So says lead author Anthony Barnosky, a professor of integrative biology at the

University of California-Berkeley. "My colleagues who study climate-induced changes through the Earth's history are more than pretty worried," Barnosky said in a press release. "In fact, some are terrified."<sup>1</sup>

### **It's the Capitalism, Stupid**

Going through the list of negative and neutral developments I just gave, I am struck by two basic observations. One is that all of these changes are strongly and dialectically linked to each other. They are all connected one to the rest in a kind of simultaneous equations system of death and decline reflecting their common grounding in the imperatives of capital and the profits system.

Look, for example, at the problem of structural unemployment. It is obviously all bound up with globalization in an era when multinational corporations have largely shut down manufacturing in the U.S. and out-sourced production to China and other cheap labor developing world nations. That export of jobs is of course source of the monstrous fortune enjoyed by the Walton heirs, for Wal Mart excels above all in selling cheap items made in China.

Globalization and structural unemployment are intimately related to mass incarceration. Most the nation's substantial and growing army of prisoners and felons come from communities where real jobs long ago disappeared. That army functions as the essential human raw material for an industry that has emerged to provide employment communities where manufacturing and farming no longer absorb much surplus labor. That industry is the prison industrial complex and the related ongoing permanent so-called War on Drugs.

Staying on this theme of interconnectivity, look at American Empire's lethal neo-colonial presence in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Behold its presence and pressure in the provocative underbelly of nuclear Russia, and look at the Empire's growing focus on East Asia and particularly on the oil-rich South China Sea. That dangerous and unbound presence is obviously related to the end of the Cold War = to the capitalist defeat and collapse of the Soviet Union. It also reflects inter-imperial rivalry over what's left of the world's declining stock of easily accessible fossil fuels.<sup>2</sup>

One interconnection that particularly deserves mention here given my topic today is the

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<sup>1</sup> Common Dreams Staff, "Earth Facing Imminent Environmental Tipping Point: Report," *Common Dreams* (June 7, 2012) at <https://www.commondreams.org/headline/2012/06/07-3> On the current grave and deepening environmental crisis, see John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review, 2010); Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Climate Change Odds Much Worse Than Thought: New Analysis Shows Warming Could Be Double Previous Estimates," *MIT News*, May 19, 2009, at <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/roulette-0519.html#>; Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010); Mark Lynas, *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007); Chris Williams, *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010); James Gustav Speth, *The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, The Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), Herve Kempf, *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Klare, *The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources* (New York: Metropolitan, 2012).

intimate relationship between inequality and ecological collapse. The promise of growth has long been western capitalism's answer for the inequality that the profits system creates. "A rising tide lifts all boats," longstanding Western "growth ideology" proclaims, supposedly rendering irrelevant popular anger over the fact that an opulent minority sails in luxurious yachts while others struggle in rickety dinghies and leaking rowboats. "Governments love growth," the British environmental writer George Monbiot notes, "because it excuses them from dealing with inequality.... Growth is a political sedative, snuffing out protest, permitting governments to avoid confrontation with the rich..." The problem, of course, is that the false, conflict-avoiding solution called growth is tipping the environment past the point where it can support life in a decent fashion.<sup>3</sup>

### **"Everything Else We're Talking About Won't Matter"**

The other thing that strikes me about all those big and interrelated half-century changes I listed above is that for all their dialectical inseparability and common capitalist connectivity they are not equal. Sonbanmatsu is right when he says that the ecological crisis is "the #1 issue of *our or any time*." *Or any time*. Think about that. Climate change isn't just the biggest development of the last 50 years. It is, as the environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben notes, *the biggest thing that has ever happened in human history*. As the great American left intellectual Noam Chomsky said in a widely read essay last year, "if the [the environmental] catastrophe isn't...averted – [then] in a generation or two, everything else we're talking about won't matter."<sup>4</sup>

And that is why I always say that I don't want to choose between being a red and being a green, but that if you told me I absolutely had to decide between being a socialist or being an environmentalist, I'd go with the latter. Who wants to turn the world upside down only to find that it is irredeemably riddled with disease and decay? What good is it to inherit a poisoned Earth from the bourgeoisie? What's the point of more equally sharing out a poison pie?

Now, as it happens, I don't think we have to – or should – select between green and red. I think we can and in fact must be both.

### **A Distinctive Triage Patient**

When I cite data on environmental collapse and argue that ecology is the top issue of our time, I sometimes get accused of advocating a politics of triage – a politics of putting forward only what I think is the single most urgent problem and thereby unduly neglecting other issues that rightly concern us on the left.

Well, okay, let's go with the triage analogy for a moment. Think of all the issues that concern radicals as newly arrived patients in an over-ridden, disaster-burdened emergency room.

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<sup>3</sup> For useful discussions of the growth ideology, see Kempf, *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth*; 69-74; William Greider, *Come Home America: The Rise and Fall (and Redeeming Promise) of Our Country* (New York: Rodale, 2009), 192-217; Speth, *The Bridge*, 46-66. Monbiot is quoted in Greider.

<sup>4</sup> Noam Chomsky, "Plutonomy and the Precariat," *Huffington Post* (May 8, 2012), read online at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/noam-chomsky/plutonomy-and-the-precari\\_b\\_1499246.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/noam-chomsky/plutonomy-and-the-precari_b_1499246.html)

## 6 Critical Education

On one gurney you've got institutional racism, with numerous complications including racial profiling, hiring discrimination, residential segregation and more. On another gurney there's workers' rights, with numerous different wounds relating to labor law, overtime abuse, state-capitalist union officialdom and bureaucracy, out-sourcing, immigrant rights, and more. You've got another gurney carrying imperialism, with numerous and different fractures relating to Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Columbia, Honduras, the influence of "defense" contractors and much more. You've got yet another gurney with the problem of democracy and here again we have multiple fractures and wounds including, campaign finance law, *Citizen United*, corporate personhood, political advertising, corporate media, ballot access, spoiled ballots, winner-take-all elections, the national security state, and much more. And then there's the gurney carrying this mess called the Ecological Crisis, with various wounds and breaks and complications including not just global warming but also ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, global freshwater use, changes in land use, biodiversity loss, atmospheric aerosol loading, and chemical pollution.

We all know what triage means in the battlefield operating room. You forget about the patients that can't survive, you sort out the rest by level of urgency, and you offer first treatment to those closest to death. If Livable Ecology is the triage choice in this scenario, and it might be, I think it's a very distinctive sort of triage choice in four key ways. First and most terribly of all, I'd have to admit that it's not 100 percent clear that it isn't already too far gone. Some experts already put it in the category of un-savable. I don't agree but there you are.

Second, and also pretty terrible, it's not entirely clear to me that livable ecology is any closer to death than other issues we care about. I don't know for a fact if the time window for meaningful action on democracy or on worker rights or on economic equality is any bigger or longer than the window for saving a livable natural environment.

Third, however, if livable ecology is a save-able triage patient—and I think it is—then it's a triage patient of a very odd sort in that if it dies so do all other patients in the emergency room. To repeat the Chomsky line, "if the [the environmental] catastrophe isn't...averted – [then] in a generation or two, everything else we're talking about won't matter."

### **Green Work**

Fourth, if livable ecology is the top triage patient it's a distinctive sort of triage patient in the different sense and that the serious and effective treatment of its wounds and fractures provides much of the healing required by other patients in the ER. Take structural unemployment, imperialism and corporate globalization. Tackling climate change and other environmental ills in a meaningful way means putting many millions of people to work at all skill levels to design and implement and coordinate and construct the environmental retro-fitting of economy and society – the ecological re-conversion of production, transportation, office space, homes, agriculture, and public space. What kind of work? To start, hundreds of thousands of so-called green collar jobs involved in weatherizing and energy-retrofitting every building in the U.S. There will be plenty of work for college-educated environmental engineers and architects and planners but even more work for people without college degrees. Here's a decent passage from Van Jones bestselling 2007 book *The Green Collar Economy*:

When you think about the...green economy, don't think of George Jetson with a jet pack. Think of Joe Sixpack with a hard hat and a lunch bucket, sleeves rolled up, going off to fix America. Think of Rosie the Riveter, manufacturing parts for

hybrid buses or wind turbines...If we are going to beat global warming [Jones wrote], we are going to have to weatherize millions of buildings. Install millions of solar panels, manufacture millions of wind turbine parts, plant and care for millions of trees, build millions of plug-in hybrid vehicles, and construct thousands of solar farms, wind farms, and wave farms. This will require...millions of jobs... And don't think of green collar workers as laboring only in the energy sector...we will also need [well-paid] workers in a range of green industries: materials reuse and recycling, water management, local and organic food production, mass transportation and more.<sup>5</sup>

As demand goes up for labor thanks to an imagined boom of “green collar” jobs rights and union power improve. The vicious circle of arrest, felony-branding, and incarceration recedes as millions of inner city and suburban ring blacks and Latinos and rural whites are employed in the ecological retrofitting of ghettos and barrios and the broader society. Former prison guards and ex-cops join ex-auto-workers in the making and maintenance of local and regional and national high-speed solar- and wind-powered light rail systems and wind towers and wind turbines. The Pentagon's global petroleum protection service loses some of its imperial sting as distant and declining oil and gas reserves cease to hold the keys to development. As an added benefit, much the work involved in greening the economy and society can't be out-sourced since, as Jones notes, “it involves making over the sites where we work and live and altering how we move around. That sort of work is difficult or impossible to send abroad.” You can't pick up an office building, send it to China to have solar panels installed, and have it shipped back.

### **Van Jones' Great Mistake**

For comrades who worry that privileging the environmental issue means giving up on the socialist revolution and the struggle against the 1 percent, let me give you my 100 percent guarantee that the Green Revolution will also be bright rouge. With its inherent privileging of private profit and exchange value over the common good and social use value, with its intrinsic insistence on private management, with its inbuilt privileging of the short-term bottom line over the long-term fate of the species, with its deep sunk cost investment in the old carbon-addicted way of life and death, and with its attachment to the division of the world into competing nations and empires that are incapable of common action for the global good, capitalism is incapable of bringing about and surviving the deep environmental changes required for human survival.. “Green capitalism” is an oxymoron.<sup>6</sup> Not getting that is the great flaw of Van Jones' book and career. He seems to think that the green transformation can take place without undertaking an epic confrontation with concentrated wealth and ridding ourselves of the bourgeoisie.

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<sup>5</sup> Van Jones, *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* (New York: Harper, 2009), 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> For useful perspectives from a Marxist, red-green perspective, see Foster et al. *The Ecological Rift*; Williams, *Ecology and Socialism*.

## From Letter Grades to Pass-Fail

He's wrong about that. Saving ourselves from environmental ruin poses what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to in 1968 as "the real question to be faced...the radical reconstruction of society itself." And it poses that question with a strong emphasis on what Dr. King used to call "the fierce urgency of now." As the Marxist writer Ricardo Levins-Morales noted a few years ago, the cautious "one small step at a time" approach to progressive change loses credibility when the existing order is posing imminent radical threats to survival. "If the road we are on leads to a precipice," Levins-Morales wrote:

then a shift in...orientation is overdue....If we envision ourselves...advancing across an expanse of open field, then we can measure our progress in terms of yardage gained and be satisfied that we are least moving in the right direction. If, instead, a chasm has opened up which we must leap across to survive, then the difference between getting twenty percent versus forty percent of the way across is meaningless. It means we have transitioned from a system of political letter grades to one of 'pass/fail.' We either make the leap or not..... Too late for Van Jones (dropped under fire)...<sup>7</sup>

As the environmental tipping point chasm looms ever closer, we are coming, comrades, to our pass-fail moment. Centrist incremental-ism won't do the job. It's either the revolutionary reconstitution of society or what Marx and Engels called in 1848 the only alternative: "the common ruin of the contending classes."<sup>8</sup> Physics and chemistry don't negotiate. To prioritize ecology and green issues is not to demote or delay the socialist revolution. It means the elevation and escalation of the red project.<sup>9</sup>

## The Obvious Demand, the Obvious Analogy.

I don't have time to say everything I wanted to about Occupy – about my simultaneous love for and discomfort with the Occupy Movement. I loved the Occupy Movement – maybe I

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<sup>7</sup> Ricardo Levins-Morales, "Revolution in the Time of Hamsters," *ZNet Magazine*, September 1, 2009, read at <http://www.zcommunications.org/revolution-in-the-time-of-the-hamsters-by-ricardo-levins-morales>. "Dropped under fire" refers to the fact that Van Jones served briefly as the Obama administration's "green jobs czar" but was quickly fired (without complain from Jones) when the Republican right raised objections to his supposed radicalism.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx and Frderich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), first page, second paragraph of the first section.

<sup>9</sup> In the sixth chapter of their important volume *The Ecological Rift*, titled "The Planetary Moment of Truth," Marxist academicians Foster, Clark and York observe that "Overcoming the ecological rift (and the social rift that lies beneath it)...demands the transcendence of capitalism and the development of a genuine socialist alternative associated with substantive equality and socioeconomic-ecological planning...Given the limitless ecological crisis emanating from today's business as usual, all hope for the future of humanity and the earth must lie in this direction."



should say the Occupy moment – for putting the focus of popular anger on the real perpetrators, the real ruling class – the corporate and financial elite. I loved it for bringing back to American political culture the essential language of class, the language of us and them, of the struggling many and the privileged few, of the fat cats versus the ordinary people, of the plutocrats versus the citizenry, of the haves and the have-nots. I loved Occupy for learning from the revolting and predictable (and predicted) Obama experience to act on the wisdom of Howard Zinn’s counsel that it’s not about “who’s sitting in the White House, it’s about who’s sitting in,” who’s sitting in the streets, who’s taking direct action, who’s occupying factories, and offices, and cafeterias, and public squares and legislative halls when it comes to brining about progressive change. I loved Occupy for getting it that its about grassroots rank and file social movements beneath and beyond these big-money-big-media-major-party-narrow-spectrum-candidate-centered electoral extravaganzas the masters stage for us every 4 years, telling us “that’s politics” – the only politics that matters. I loved Occupy for daring to prefigure what a democratic community beyond class rule might look like.

At the same time, Occupy drove me nuts with its fetishization of space, its fetishization of process, its fetishization of expression over strategy, its reluctance to name and offer a serious critique of capitalism as a system, and its over-reluctance to make specific demands for real world changes desired by the working class majority of people it claimed to represent. What would have been so terrible about demanding from the beginning a financial transactions tax to pay for universal health care and the restoration of basic public family cash assistance and transitional jobs and treatment programs to end the “new Jim Crow”<sup>10</sup> of mass imprisonment and felony marking? What would have been wrong about talking from the beginning about the right to work at a livable wage and (more radically) about workers’ control and about the right to a free public education?

I put Lenin’s phrase “what is to be done” in the title of my talk. It might have been better for me to say “what is to be demanded?” With respect to the ecological crisis, “the #1 issue of our or any time,” the demand is so basic and simple and the historical analogy is so clear that its almost embarrassing to note. *The demand*, informed by deep rage over the scandalous absurdity of mass unemployment in a world of hugely unmet social need, and by rage and fear over the imminent capitalist extermination of our species and other species, is *the right to socially useful and environmentally necessary work*. The policy expression of the demand is to tax the rich with extreme prejudice to pay for public works programs dedicated to the ecological retrofitting of the American and global economy along post-carbon, post-nuclear, and post eco-cidal lines. The historical analogy is staring us in the face. I mentioned Rosie the Riveter above. The analogy is World War II, when the United States, still reeling from the Great Depression, taxed its rich like never before and reconverted its economy and put millions to socially useful work producing what the world needed at the time: weapons and other goods to defeat fascism. Crippled now by another systemic depression, the so-called Great Recession, the first true crisis of capitalism in its neoliberal phase, America can and must do it again. We can and must reconvert our economy and reorient our society to produce what humanity requires if we are to have any chance for a decent and democratic future. This time, however, there’s an added benefit – the re-conversion required will take us once and for all beyond the world the 1 percent made and into a world both saved and turned upside down. Let the rouge-verde revolution begin. Soon. Thank you very much.

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<sup>10</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: Metropolitan, 2010).

### **Author**

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