Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar: “Pensar las condiciones de una política no estadocéntrica”

Originalmenle publicado en alainet el 28 de julio de 2017.

Charlar con la socióloga, matemática y luchadora social mexicana, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, empaparse de una visión que se nutre fundamentalmente desde las luchas populares, desde abajo, y confrontarla con las experiencias y saberes producidos en el marco de la «Revolución Bolivariana» venezolana, hace de este, un encuentro más que fructífero y retador. Con Raquel, quien desde 2011 es docente en el Instituto de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades de la Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, compartiendo espacio con John Holloway –con quien tiene una cercanía teórica–, y que además es una investigadora muy poco conocida en Venezuela –país que nunca ha visitado–, hemos conversado sobre asuntos medulares para América Latina, como las claves para entender los procesos recientes en la región, dónde ubicar y cómo mirar al Estado en las cartografías políticas de análisis, interpretaciones del papel de los gobiernos progresistas en nuestros procesos de transformación, y también algunos planteamientos sobre el chavismo y el zapatismo.

ETM: Los procesos de transformación recientes en América Latina han supuesto también, tanto un redimensionamiento de las disputas epistemológicas para comprender nuestros procesos históricos en la región, como la aparición de nuevos problemas, nuevos elementos, nuevos sujetos. ¿Cuáles son las claves que propones para interpretar estos procesos?

RGA: Yo leo la historia reciente de América Latina a partir de las luchas que se han protagonizado desde abajo, y que fueron un conjunto de luchas muy potentes, muy decisivas, muy masivas, que se fueron relevando. Podemos empezar justamente desde aquel «Caracazo» inaugural, empezar a ver en los noventas el acuerpamiento y la potencia del movimiento indígena ecuatoriano, que empezó a ocupar tierra, que empezó a disputar decisión política, que empezó a cuestionar formas de exclusión, etc. Pero después, a partir del 2000, vemos una ola enorme de movimientos en América latina, la sucesión de caídas de presidentes. En Buenos Aires, por la lucha bonaerense básicamente, por la lucha piquetera, pero que era una lucha en toda Argentina, y que descarriló el proyecto liberal menemista, obligando y empujando a una reconstitución posterior. Vemos la ola de levantamientos y movilizaciones en Bolivia que desde el 2000 en Cochabamba, después con los continuos cercos a la ciudad de La Paz que estableció el movimiento Aymara, con la insurgencia cocalera de Evo, fue desgastando totalmente el modelo neoliberal en Bolivia hasta su caída

y hasta la posterior llegada a la presidencia por Evo Morales, uno de los representantes importantes de esos movimientos que protagonizaban la lucha. Y así podríamos seguir pasando lista. Esos que mencioné son los casos más conocidos, los casos más estridentes.

Yo tengo la impresión de que lo que se acentuó en esos momentos fue una capacidad de veto social, se fue produciendo colectivamente una capacidad de veto. Se llegó un momento en el que no era admisible una forma de ejercicio del gobierno, una forma liberal, absolutamente pro-capitalista, y así fueron cayendo esos gobiernos. Entonces, ese es un primer punto que me parece muy relevante. Es decir, detesto expresarlo con claridad, las lecturas que parten de arriba hacia abajo, que parten de la omnipotencia, omnisciencia y gran sagacidad generalmente de un gran barón, porque esa es una acción de desconocimiento radical de ese protagonismo de quienes ponen el cuerpo en los caminos, en los bloqueos, en las luchas, etc. Hombres y mujeres, niños, ancianos y ancianas, sociedad movilizada, sociedad en movimiento, ¿a partir de qué? A partir de sus heterogéneas y polimorfas tramas asociativas, que llega un momento en que se politizan. Entonces, no estoy desconociendo la relevancia de organizaciones estructuradas de manera más canónica, de las figuras de agregación sindical, frentista, partidaria; estoy al mismo tiempo tratando de plantear una línea para descentrarlas del protagonismo, y ver, tomar interés y darle la importancia a eso, a lo cual no se le da.

En la narrativa del gran sujeto moderno que disputa al otro gran sujeto abstracto que es el capital –entendido como relación social, pero de alguna manera inasible–, se le contrapone otro gran sujeto mítico en la figura de un caudillo, en la figura de un partido, en la figura de una gran organización sindical, que lo que hace es empañarnos la mirada para entender con mucha mayor claridad y con mayor profundidad este conjunto de actividades cotidianas, sistemáticas, desparramadas, desagregadas por el mismo capital, pero susceptibles de politización y de veto de aquello que no les conviene. Esa es mi clave de interpretación de la realidad latinoamericana, de ahí que yo nunca fui particularmente entusiasta por los gobiernos progresistas, sin estar en contra de ellos. Simplemente, ahí no me parece que está ni lo más interesante, ni lo más creativo, ni lo más capaz de producir novedades políticas que trastoquen y subviertan las relaciones de dominio del capital, me parece que eso está en lo otro. Y me parece también que la subversión de las relaciones del capital, de su domino, de su control, de su continua cadena de despojos e imposiciones, va de la mano con un sujetar políticamente a las personas, a estas tramas comunitarias centradas en la reproducción de la vida, polimorfas y susceptibles de asociación, que intervienen diciendo “no”, pero después, cuando empieza el momento de la positivización, son capturadas por acciones extranacionales. Y eso, siento yo, que es algo que ha pasado sistemáticamente en los propios países con gobiernos progresistas.

El gobierno venezolano, honestamente, no conozco exactamente cómo pasa, pero tanto de los otros dos que son sus “primos chicos”, el señor Correa y el señor Morales, y los

gobiernos que ellos encabezan, me parece que han concedido demasiado en términos de reconstrucción de formatos y leyes, formatos institucionales y andamiajes legales absolutamente concordantes con el orden de acumulación del capital. Con un orden de acumulación del capital un poco distinto que, por ejemplo en el caso boliviano, limita y se trata de desatar de las corporaciones trasnacionales más poderosas del mundo que anteriormente estaban ahí sujetando, pero que vuelve a atarse a otro tipo de intereses, como los intereses de la oligarquía brasileña.

Finalmente, la lucha potente protagonizada por estas comunidades que se suelen insolentar, que se insubordinan y que pueden abrir caminos de reconstrucción de la posibilidad de convivir de otra manera, no tiene nada que ver con escoger entre modalidades de la acumulación del capital, sin negar que hay algunas más profundamente depredadoras de otras, pero sabiendo al mismo tiempo que a la larga van a ser lo mismo, y van a caminar en el mismo camino. Porque finalmente –otra vez–, la relación de los procesos de acumulación del capital se basan en la devastación, se basan en la desposesión y se basan en la explotación. Entonces, partiendo de ahí ya tengo un panorama.

ETM: Creo que en la actualidad tenemos signos muy claros de que estos recientes procesos de cambio de corte progresista en América Latina parecen estar ralentizados o estancados, donde además se han abierto espacios para que diversas fuerzas reemerjan y estén disputándose, con más vehemencia, la hegemonía y el control político en varios de esos países. Dado este escenario, ¿cómo visualizas el panorama de la región, y en especial el de los gobiernos progresistas para los años venideros?

RAG: La cosa es que yo siento que estos gobiernos progresistas en realidad se han dado un tiro en el pie, porque han desconocido la fuerza de donde salieron, y han concentrado sus esfuerzos en los últimos cinco o seis años en conseguir las condiciones organizativas y políticas para cabalgar esos movimientos, para cooptarlos, para capturarlos política y organizativamente, es decir, para limitar su capacidad beligerante y sobre todo su posibilidad de relanzar objetivos políticos. Entonces, lo que ha ocurrido es que ha habido un re-monopolización de la decisión sobre el asunto general que excluye a los protagonistas que produjeron los propios gobiernos, y que se coloca sobre ellos a título de esa cosa abstracta que es “la nación” –que es la unidad ideal para la acumulación de capital–, y se ha convertido en una especie de “administrador general” de cosas, en vez de auspiciador de procesos transformativos; y eso colapsa porque tiene un límite.

Los gobiernos progresistas ahora están acosados desde varios lugares, se ven amenazados, están siendo deglutidos por el capital chino en Ecuador –el “deglutidos” en sentido literal–, y en el caso boliviano están siendo acosados, por ejemplo, por las trasnacionales de la agroexportación, con las que nunca se desataron. Y sí, tienen una creciente capacidad todavía en Bolivia, un poco más fisurada en Ecuador, de establecer términos de control

sobre sus propias poblaciones, de generar procesos muy simulados –porque son copia y calca de la democracia procedimental que hace diez años estábamos tratando de hacer caer, tratando de habilitar procesos de producción de la decisión política mucho más vastos, mucho más profundos–; tienen esa capacidad allí, pero cada vez menos tienen esa capacidad de confrontar ofensivas como la que está atravesando Venezuela, cada vez están más incómodos para eso, cada vez son más vulnerables, porque hay un error sistemático en esta cuestión de dónde viene la fuerza, de quiénes son los protagonistas de la transformación social. Hay una confusión tremenda, y es que los 300 o 400 años –porque si ponemos una generalización de relaciones tendencialmente liberales y capitalistas a partir de las reformas borbónicas del XVIII, digamos, para contar– hay históricamente una tendencia a ese desconocimiento de la fuerza colectiva, una tendencia hacia una individualización brutal, una tendencia hacia centrar la mirada en estos procesos llamados modernizadores pero que son en realidad acciones brutales de «despojos múltiples», porque son despojos múltiples en términos de riqueza material y despojos de capacidad política.

Entonces, no me extraña que estén desgastándose, viéndose más débiles, teniendo que conceder más cosas, viéndose acorralados por otros intereses, etc. La fuerza no era de ellos, nunca lo ha sido. Ellos fueron fuertes en tanto fueron expresión de ese conjunto de tendencias y de anhelos que se pusieron en juego y no pueden dejar de serlo, pero al mismo tiempo su intención fue tratar de dejar de serlo. Entonces, dan “gato por liebre”, es tremendo porque se expropia la capacidad de producir decisión sobre asuntos generales y se le devuelven bonos focalizados para permitirte consumir un poco más. Eso no es algo que estuviera planteado en el horizonte comunitario popular que yo creo que sí despegó, se hizo visible, audible, perceptible en América Latina en la década pasada.

Y ahora tenemos una revisión de los esfuerzos que ya hemos visto ocurrir, una revisión “trucha” –diríamos a lo peruano–, una revisión pirata de una película que ya vimos, porque ni siquiera es un esfuerzo por reconstruir unos Estados más o menos parecidos a los tramos de bienestar que tuvimos en otros momentos, con Estados realmente fuertes que emprenden acciones económicas realmente serias. Tenemos una especie de Estados que negocian, que se arrogan en el mundo del mercado que domina al mundo, en calidad de titulares de la posibilidad de negociar lo que no es de ellos a partir de regímenes de concesión, por un lado, igualito que los gobiernos liberales más horribles como el de Colombia y el de México; y por otro lado, tenemos políticas de tutela a partir de programas focalizados. Entonces, concesión y tutela, los dos grandes pilares que, al menos en los países andinos de altura, quisieron destrozar y hacer caer estos movimientos, los ves reinstalados por los gobiernos progresistas que sí, mantienen cierto control y van a ganar las elecciones, con ese procedimiento tramposísimo que es el procedimentalismo electoral, y más si estás ocupando el aparato del Estado. Pero qué de aquellas grandes deliberaciones públicas, qué de aquella apropiación de la capacidad de decidir y de incidir, qué de aquella capacidad que la vimos existir. Bueno, por eso se dieron un tiro en el pie, entonces caminan

cojos y a ver hasta dónde llegan, y caminan despacito, en eso va esa ralentización que tú ves, ese debilitamiento, así lo veo yo.

ETM: Si estos gobiernos son tan funcionales al capital, ¿por qué el ataque imperialista que se ha dado constantemente sobre estos países? ¿Cómo podríamos explicar esa contraposición? Históricamente, uno ve que los sistemas más funcionales han sido más bien sostenidos por los grandes capitales, evitando las conflictividades internas y tratando de mantener justamente el orden. ¿Cómo tratar de entender, si son tan funcionales al capital, que haya ese ataque de diversas formas?

RGA: O sea, los ataca el imperialismo estadounidense, no los ataca el capitalismo ruso reconstruido: es su aliado. No los ataca el capitalismo chino explotador: es su aliado. Entonces, lee a nivel más amplio el conjunto de dinámicas, de confrontación geopolítica que nos tienen al borde de la "N" guerra mundial, que nos tienen en vilo, porque se está amenazando una confrontación muy drástica en momentos de una depresión en el propio corazón del capitalismo industrial, que no acaba de terminar, que no termina, y eso exacerba las contradicciones interimperialistas, como lo dicen los clásicos. Pero es un recorte heredado de una lectura de los años 50, el pensar que el imperialismo capitalista es solamente encarnado por los Estados Unidos, y de lo que yo estoy hablando es de la relación del capital. Estos gobiernos progresistas tienen de donde escoger, y eso es lo que han estado negociando. Han estado negociando con el diablo habiéndose disparado en el pie, pues, por eso es que están "remal".

ETM: Si hipotéticamente, se abriera en América Latina un nuevo proceso de reconstitución de un bloque popular sobre la base del descontento social, donde se conjugaran los movimientos sociales con los ciudadanos explotados, excluidos e indignados, y se abriera un nuevo camino para la transformación profunda de las sociedades latinoamericanas, o al menos de algunos países, ¿qué papel podría jugar el Estado, tomando en cuenta sus propios límites estructurales, en la configuración de procesos sociales de transición? ¿Qué rol juega no sólo en la dinámica interna de un país determinado o de un bloque, sino en la geopolítica?

RGA: Pues, me haces una pregunta que a mí me saca de mis cánones comprensivos. Yo no suelo pensar desde el Estado porque no me interesa, y no es que sea un antiestatalismo furibundo, es que a mí lo que me interesa es la lucha; porque lo que veo es que es en la lucha donde se pone en juego la cosa, la posibilidad misma de producción, la posibilidad misma de que tenga sentido tu pregunta. Entonces, lo que estoy reflexionando desde el año 2009 cuando se empezó a sentir, a percibir ya el aquietamiento de estos ritmos de transformación, se da sobre la base de dos ideas centrales que me dan mucha luz: por un lado, el hecho de tener mayor claridad y de seguir trabajando con una postura política de abajo que sea "no estadocéntrica", es decir, no estoy diciendo que sea antiestatal, a veces es

muy bueno tener un aliado en el Estado, pero ese no puede ser el objetivo nunca. Si nos colamos de chanfle como en Bolivia colamos a Evo, de chanfle absoluto, a la presidencia del gobierno, cuando se deciden las elecciones presidenciales de 2005, las que gana Evo, tenías el país paralizado por bloqueos en todos lados. La gente movilizada fue capaz de poner cercos en La Paz, cercos en Sucre, cuando el congreso se traslada a otra ciudad para poder sesionar y decidir las medidas contra la población. En fin, ahí se desplomó, ahí quedó muy evidente que ya los que estaban gobernando no podían gobernar, que se había quebrado un orden de mando.

Entonces, lo más importante de ese momento, lo que yo he aprendido y eso es a lo que pongo mi esfuerzo, es en pensar las condiciones de una política "no estadocéntrica", que puede hablar con el Estado, pero me interesa pensar y pulir la política desde lo "no estadocéntrico", es decir, cómo conservamos el lugar de enunciación y la autonomía material, política y moral para continuar logrando establecer una discusión política de altura con aquel que gobierne, sea quien sea. Y la respuesta que voy encontrando, es que el punto de partida no puede ser la recomposición de la acumulación de capital, o variar los términos de la acumulación de capital, sino que tiene que ser el concentrarnos realmente en entender y analizar el ámbito de la reproducción material de la vida social y establecer desde ahí, desde las necesidades que estén produciéndose ahí, los términos que tienen que guiar la actividad política de los que estén fuera del Estado, y la posibilidad de mandatar a quien ocupa el Estado. Un poco así me estoy imaginando la cosa.

Entonces, a partir de eso, si tú me concedes toda esa premisa, pues yo te trato ahora sí de responder a tu pregunta, pero es totalmente hipotética. ¿Qué cosas sí necesitamos y qué cosas no necesitamos? Eso es algo que tiene que deliberarse socialmente. ¿Qué cosas sí queremos y qué cosas no queremos? ¿Qué cosas podemos proponernos producir, qué cosas no podemos no necesitar, y qué cosas podemos aplicar? Esa discusión social no es una cuestión de expertos decidiendo, esa deliberación general, para ir dando respuestas a esas preguntas, pues, sería la clave que me marcaría el tono de con qué capital y con qué procesos de acumulación negocio y de cuál comienzo zafarme. Así un poco me lo imagino, pero es una perspectiva.

A mí me da la impresión de que la contradicción principal, fundamental, que vivimos en América Latina es entre estas tramas comunitarias cada vez más despojadas de su posibilidad de reproducir su vida material y estos consorcios trasnacionales. Entonces, la cosa es cómo desde esta fuerza los repliegas, cómo te da tiempo –y que necesitas tiempo, esto es una cuestión de escala y de ritmo, es una cuestión de tiempo también–, cómo empiezas a producir, cómo se empieza a producir colectivamente esta discusión, esta deliberación política sobre el modo que queremos vivir, y de ahí se va mandatando a quien ocupe la figura o lugar del Estado, de qué cosas sí se necesitan y qué cosas no. Así me imagino yo el comunismo de nuestra era, no el Socialismo del siglo XXI, sino eso.

ETM: Tomando en cuenta que cada país latinoamericano tiene sus diferencias, ¿cómo impulsar, desde estos sentidos que analizas, un proyecto emancipatorio en países en los cuales, condiciones de relativa fortaleza de las tramas comunitarias, de relativa organización social, no están dadas en su punto? ¿Cómo hacer cuando estos tejidos comunitarios y las formas de organización popular han sido severamente lesionados y desmembrados por un proceso de destrucción, de despojo largo y prolongado? ¿Cómo podríamos pensar en esos escenarios un poco más complicados?

RGA: Yo creo que estos pensamientos tienen un carácter muy particular y son pensamientos que emergen desde situaciones, que están situados. Porque si te estoy hablando de que yo trato de aprender de las luchas, que mi escalpelo para entender las cosas es desde las luchas, es en medio de las luchas, entonces esto no te lo sabría responder así en frío. Pero lo que yo pienso es que las luchas potentes que ha habido en esos países en los momentos críticos, son los que tienen que poder alumbrar otras posibilidades. Porque el pensamiento que dice que no hay otra posibilidad que la que está siguiéndose es un pensamiento conservador y cobarde. Entonces, esa esterilidad es de la que hay que renunciar. ¿Y dónde están los momentos genuinamente fértiles para abrir las posibilidades? En los momentos de quiebre, como decía Walter Benjamín, los momentos en los que las contradicciones quedan iluminadas, los momentos en los que las posibilidades también se delinean al menos como aspiración.

Bueno, qué pasó en esos países, ¿de cuál hablamos? ¿De Venezuela? Qué pasó en el "Caracazo", qué pasó en la defensa de Chávez durante el golpe de 2002, qué pasó en otros momentos importantes de protagonismo de la población venezolana en su heterogeneidad. No sé si ahí haya o no haya tramas comunitarias, pero lo que sí sé es que tiene que haber algún tipo de forma asociativa, porque la gente no vive sola. Que pueden ser formas asociativas despolitizadas, pero qué hicieron esas personas, esos hombres y mujeres concretos en esos momentos, qué quisieron. Yo lo que haría sería estudiar eso y capaz encuentro que hay lugares donde eso no existe, pero capaz encuentro que sí hay.

ETM: En estos procesos de transformación regionales, en sus diversos grados, donde resalta el bloque diverso que supuso los planteamientos más radicales, más alternativos, como lo fueron Venezuela, Bolivia y Ecuador, y algunas reivindicaciones populares en otros países, finalmente, vemos que todos ellos terminan convergiendo y reinscribiéndose en la máquina capitalista, todos terminan redimensionando los modelos capitalistas/rentistas que son los modelos predominantes en América Latina. ¿Cómo desconectarse de estos proyectos y en qué sentido el proyecto del zapatismo puede ser aún una referencia para las dinámicas políticas emancipatorias de nuestra región?

RGA: Yo sigo sintiendo que el zapatismo es una experiencia tremendamente valiosa, sin que necesariamente tenga que ser referencia. Yo siento que la experiencia zapatista y todos sus

esfuerzos, y ahora todos esos esfuerzos desde los últimos diez años de construir un autogobierno, de establecer condiciones, de relanzar siempre su posibilidad de autodeterminación, por supuesto territorialmente asentada y defenderla, lo que son es un ejemplo de perseverancia, y en ese sentido, como ellos mismos dicen siempre, a lo más que pueden llegar es a ser un espejo, no un referente, un espejo para que otros problemas se vean en ellos y decidan como le hacen. Esa es la cosa, otras voces han puesto al zapatismo como modelo, yo siento que los zapatistas no se han puesto ellos mismos de modelo nunca. Ellos lo que hacen es decir que sí y que no, y tratan de lanzar conversaciones con el resto, pero no están tratando de ser una teoría general, no están tratando de pretender que pueden resolver ellos todos los problemas. Toman un lugar bastante más humilde, que yo creo que nos convendría tomar.

¿Por qué pretendemos desde otro flanco ideológico, ocupar el mismo lugar al que han ambicionado las élites dirigentes del capitalismo a lo largo de los siglos? ¿Por qué tendríamos que ser como ellos? ¿Por qué tendríamos que aspirar a un lugar particular y afirmativo, que es el lugar del Estado? ¿Por qué no mejor ensayamos una lucha tenaz en términos particulares y vemos hasta donde llega, y otra, y otra, y nos preguntamos por los problemas que tienen esas luchas en generalizarse y en producir puentes que les permitan reforzarse mutuamente? A mí esas preguntas me parecen más interesantes que cómo pueda ser el modelo de Estado X, porque eso no lo sé, y porque además en el momento en que haces las preguntas desde ese lugar, ocupas un lugar de enunciación que va a jalar tu propio pensamiento hacia condescender y hacia establecer términos de reconstitución de mando, de desconocimiento de protagonismo, etc., ya ha pasado muchas veces. Entonces, hay que relanzar las preguntas, me parece.

ETM: ¿Cuáles preguntas propondrías tú, por ejemplo?

RGA: La de cómo puede continuar la lucha, desde cómo pueden ser modos más agudos, de cómo pueden haber articulaciones autónomas entre las luchas, de cómo se puede pensar en la transformación a partir de la reproducción social de la vida material –lo cual parece un oxímoron-, de cómo se puede descentrar el asunto de entender la vida a partir de la reproducción del capital. Preguntas políticas, preguntas epistémicas, preguntas de fondo. Esas son las que me gustan, esas son las preguntas de la lucha.

ETM: Cuando uno piensa en la idea de «agrietar el capitalismo» de Holloway, se pudiese decir que reconoce que los proyectos populares emancipatorios se enfrentan a un sistema que está en cierta forma omnipresente o intenta estarlo en la cotidianidad, en la territorialidad. Y esta idea de agrietar el capitalismo pudiésemos llevarla, y disculpa que insista, al carácter de relación social que también tiene el Estado. Si como has dicho, el proyecto no debe ser estadocéntrico, pero reconoce que el estado existe, ¿no habría una posibilidad también de admitir que hay que agrietar al Estado?

RGA: Claro que hay que agrietar al Estado, claro, pero el Estado no se agrieta solo. Hay que agrietar el Estado y el Estado se agrieta desde afuera. Y si puedes colar a alguien para que ayude a meter un barreno y haga palanca, pero tienes la fuerza para que cuando te quiera pegar a ti con el barreno tú le dices: “oye, cálmate, te tocaba palanquear para que se cayera lo que había”. Eso es un poco lo que siento. Es que uno siempre está atravesado por la propia relación del capital también, entonces uno siempre está desgarrado entre lanzar el vínculo con el resto de una manera y otra, instrumentalizas o acuerpas, explotas o cooperas, pero puedes hacerlo. Y no estoy tratando de reinstalar una especie de individualismo metodológico porque yo siempre trato de pensar las cosas en términos colectivos, pero lo que quiero decir es que siempre hay amplias matrices de posibilidades, y que la estatal no es la única.

Entonces, vámonos construyendo palabras, términos, categorías analíticas para ir distinguiendo desde afuera del Estado cómo queremos que sean, si alguien tiene que estar ocupando en el mando, en vez de estarles echando porras. Y eso no quiere decir que tú te pongas en una condición de sistemático desafío, de sistemática contraposición, de ninguna manera, pero la fuerza social capaz de protagonizar la transformación social no puede renunciar a pensar con su propia cabeza, a hablar sus propias palabras, porque si no le aventamos una película. Eso siento. ¡Ya está muy rollero esto! (Risas)

ETM: Déjame hacerte un par de preguntas más. ¿Cómo evalúas los procesos de consolidación o germinación de tramas comunitarias en el marco de la última década en América Latina? ¿En los países más tocados por estos procesos de cambio, han crecido, han florecido, o por el contrario se han visto en retroceso?

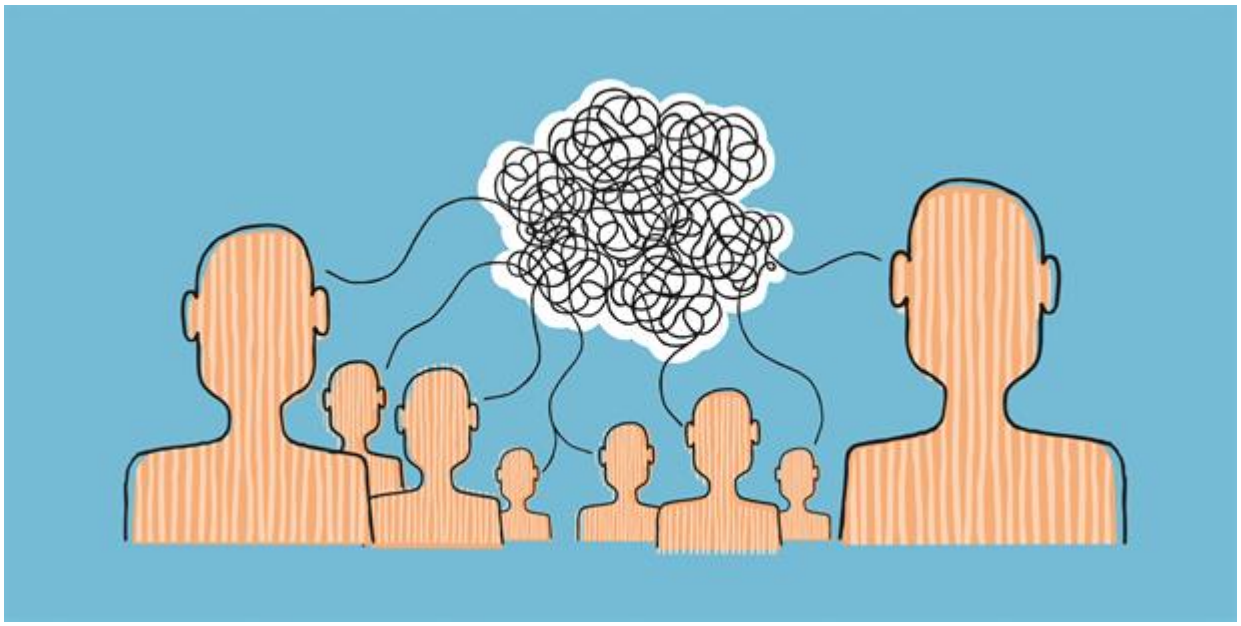
RGA: Mira, las tramas están de por sí. En los lugares en los que el capital ha avanzado tremendamente las tramas se destejen, por supuesto que sí, pero las tramas se regeneran también en otras partes. El problema duro que hay que ver es la despolitización creciente de esas tramas, ese es el verdadero problema, ese el tiro en el pie, la despolitización de esas tramas. Es decir, su cooptación, su sujeción, su enmarcamiento en formatos de decisión ajena, la inhibición de su deliberación, etc. Lo que vimos –que yo te destacaba con mucho gusto porque me tocó vivirlo, por suerte, en América del sur–, ese momento en el que se hace evidente esa capacidad política de la gente común, es un momento mágico, es un momento feroz, es un momento fuerte. Entonces, cómo es posible que hayamos regresado al estado de despolitización, es la pregunta que me quita el sueño, y cómo sería posible volver a contribuir a su politización. La tarea que yo tomo para mí es la de ir tratando de tomar esa pregunta desde una especie de razonamiento muy abstracto y tratar de contestarla, y son todas las cosas que te he dicho, eso es lo que veo. Entonces, el entramado comunitario no lo veo desbarajado, lo veo reconstruido, lo veo reconstruyéndose, pero sí lo veo despolitizado, como en el caso mexicano.

ETM: Finalmente. Las luchas contrahegemónicas populares, de la izquierda, antisistémicas –como quisiéramos catalogarlas– en Latinoamérica están hermanadas, en el sentido de que todas son producto del sufrimiento de la explotación capitalista, de la discriminación y el despojo, el ataque a sus territorios. Pero uno nota al menos en los últimos 20 años que hay una divergencia marcada. Por ejemplo, por un lado está el zapatismo como una especie de marca, de característica de cómo pensar la lucha; y por el otro está el "chavismo", entendiéndose como un proceso que está enmarcado primordialmente en torno al Estado. Estas dos corrientes en algunos escenarios parecen confrontarse, parecen contraponerse, no sólo interpelarse, sino a veces hasta chocar y señalarse mutuamente. Si uno parte de la premisa de que es fundamental la articulación de movimientos de lucha, ¿En qué horizontes podemos articular estas dos líneas políticas, que en realidad están hermanadas por las luchas anticapitalistas y antineoliberales que constituyen los movimientos desde sus bases populares, pero que en algunos escenarios aparecen como confrontadas, o satanizándose unas a las otras? Es decir, ¿Cómo podemos rearticular estas dos luchas o estos dos campos en un sentido de lucha a escala regional?

RGA:El zapatismo sí sé que es, el chavismo no me queda muy claro. El chavismo me parece un término demasiado polisémico, porque el chavismo puede ser la decisión de Maduro y su almohada, o la lucha generada de todos los venezolanos sacando y peleando por algo que les compete y deliberando entre sí lo que quieren o no establecer. Entonces, una tarea para el chavismo, me parece, ahora que falta Chávez, es establecer los términos del contenido desde esa expresión. Entonces, bajo el contexto actual me parece que no se puede, no le veo, ¿por qué? Porque de un lado sí veo que está claro y uno puede opinar lo que uno quiera del zapatismo, puede haber una guerra tremenda de posiciones, pero está bastante bien dicho qué cosa hacen y qué cosa no. Y han establecido a lo largo de muchos años su unidad y la han ido desarrollando, han vuelto sobre ella, y la han relanzado. Pero digamos que me resulta más comprensible, quizá porque soy mexicana y porque nunca he ido a Venezuela. Pero la polisemia del término "chavismo" me parece abismal, porque hay que preguntarse desde la pertinencia de una política no estadocéntrica, si esta idea, en una de las acepciones del chavismo, puede ser compatible con uno de los ejemplos contemporáneos más sistemáticos de plantear políticas estadocéntricas. Pues no se puede. Ahora, lo que yo creo es que en el proceso y en la lucha larga del pueblo venezolano hay muchos más contenidos que los contenidos estadocéntricos que quedan explícitos por lo general, y que son destacados por la prensa internacional, pero a veces también por el propio gobierno, como si ellos fueran el ojo de Dios o los que hacen las cosas. Entonces, ahí mi interés sería más bien tener posibilidad de saber qué más hay, eso me gustaría mucho, entender las fuentes de la fuerza del pueblo venezolano que nutrieron a Chávez, pero que Chávez no es la fuente.

Puebla, mayo 2014

Eric Cheyfitz: The Disinformation Age



“My meaning of disinformation is a real historical break in political discourse so that what begins to happen – and it is reflexive rather than conscious or planned by any particular entity – is that another history starts to emerge which itself is detached from actual history. That [detached] history takes hold and becomes the status quo in a particular nation state… What ultimately happens is that there is no longer a political vocabulary to deal with political realities, so consequently, problems can’t be solved. And the status quo, which is increasingly an unequal status quo, is exacerbated. And that’s where we are. We have intense income inequality in this country [the U.S] that is not being dealt with; we have endless war in this country that is not being dealt with, and we have absolutely no language to address these issues.”

Listen to the full interview below.

Damian Carrington: Record-breaking Climate Change Pushes World into 'Uncharted Territory'

This article was originally published on March 20, 2017 in The Guardian.

The record-breaking heat that made 2016 the hottest year ever recorded has continued into 2017, pushing the world into "truly uncharted territory", according to the World Meteorological Organisation.

The WMO's assessment of the climate in 2016, published on Tuesday, reports unprecedented heat across the globe, exceptionally low ice at both poles and surging sea-level rise.

Global warming is largely being driven by emissions from human activities, but a strong El Niño – a natural climate cycle – added to the heat in 2016. The El Niño is now waning, but the extremes continue to be seen, with temperature records tumbling in the US in February

and polar heatwaves pushing ice cover to new lows.

“Even without a strong El Niño in 2017, we are seeing other remarkable changes across the planet that are challenging the limits of our understanding of the climate system. We are now in truly uncharted territory,” said David Carlson, director of the WMO’s world climate research programme.

“Earth is a planet in upheaval due to human-caused changes in the atmosphere,” said Jeffrey Kargel, a glaciologist at the University of Arizona in the US. “In general, drastically changing conditions do not help civilisation, which thrives on stability.”

The WMO report was “startling”, said Prof David Reay, an emissions expert at the University of Edinburgh: “The need for concerted action on climate change has never been so stark nor the stakes so high.”

The new WMO assessment also prompted some scientists to criticise Donald Trump. “While the data show an ever increasing impact of human activities on the climate system, the Trump administration and senior Republicans in Congress continue to bury their heads in the sand,” said Prof Sir Robert Watson, a distinguished climate scientist at the UK’s University of East Anglia and a former head of the UN’s climate science panel.

“Our children and grandchildren will look back on the climate deniers and ask how they could have sacrificed the planet for the sake of cheap fossil fuel energy, when the cost of inaction exceeds the cost of a transition to a low-carbon economy,” Watson said.

Trump is aiming to cut climate change research. But the WMO’s secretary-general Petteri Taalas said: “Continued investment in climate research and observations is vital if our scientific knowledge is to keep pace with the rapid rate of climate change.”

2016 saw the hottest global average among thermometer measurements stretching back to 1880. But scientific research indicates the world was last this warm about 115,000 years ago and that the planet has not experienced such high levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere for 4m years.

2017 has seen temperature records continue to tumble, in the US where February was exceptionally warm, and in Australia, where prolonged and extreme heat struck many states. The consequences have been particularly stark at the poles.

“Arctic ice conditions have been tracking at record low conditions since October, persisting for six consecutive months, something not seen before in the [four-decade] satellite data record,” said Prof Julienne Stroeve, at University College London in the UK. “Over in the

southern hemisphere, the sea ice also broke new record lows in the seasonal maximum and minimum extents, leading to the least amount of global sea ice ever recorded."

Emily Shuckburgh, at the British Antarctic Survey, said: "The Arctic may be remote, but changes that occur there directly affect us. The melting of the Greenland ice sheet is already contributing significantly to sea level rise, and new research is highlighting that the melting of Arctic sea ice can alter weather conditions across Europe, Asia and North America."

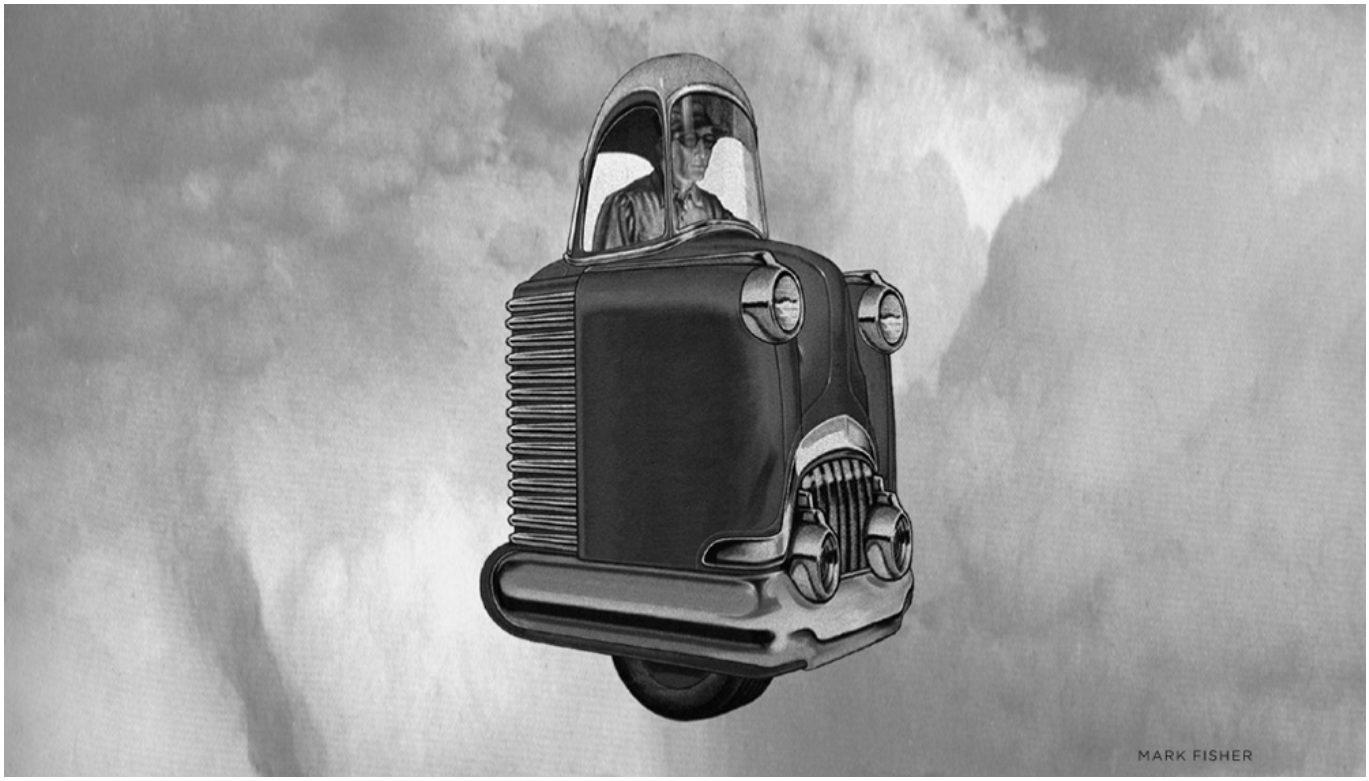
Global sea level rise surged between November 2014 and February 2016, with the El Niño event helping the oceans rise by 15mm. That jump would have take five years under the steady rise seen in recent decades, as ice caps melt and oceans get warmer and expand in volume. Final data for 2016 sea level rise have yet to be published.

Climate change harms people most directly by increasing the risk of extreme weather events and the WMO report states that these raised risks can increasingly be calculated. For example, the Arctic heatwaves are made tens of times more likely and the soaring temperatures seen in Australia in February were made twice as likely.

"With levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere consistently breaking new records, the influence of human activities on the climate system has become more and more evident," said Taalas.

David Graeber: Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit

This article was originally published in The Baffler.



A secret question hovers over us, a sense of disappointment, a broken promise we were given as children about what our adult world was supposed to be like. I am referring not to the standard false promises that children are always given (about how the world is fair, or how those who work hard shall be rewarded), but to a particular generational promise—given to those who were children in the fifties, sixties, seventies, or eighties—one that was never quite articulated as a promise but rather as a set of assumptions about what our adult world would be like. And since it was never quite promised, now that it has failed to come true, we're left confused: indignant, but at the same time, embarrassed at our own indignation, ashamed we were ever so silly to believe our elders to begin with.

Where, in short, are the flying cars? Where are the force fields, tractor beams, teleportation pods, antigravity sleds, tricorders, immortality drugs, colonies on Mars, and all the other technological wonders any child growing up in the mid-to-late twentieth century assumed would exist by now? Even those inventions that seemed ready to emerge—like cloning or cryogenics—ended up betraying their lofty promises. What happened to them?

We are well informed of the wonders of computers, as if this is some sort of unanticipated compensation, but, in fact, we haven't moved even computing to the point of progress that people in the fifties expected we'd have reached by now. We don't have computers we can have an interesting conversation with, or robots that can walk our dogs or take our clothes to the Laundromat.

As someone who was eight years old at the time of the Apollo moon landing, I remember calculating that I would be thirty-nine in the magic year 2000 and wondering what the world

would be like. Did I expect I would be living in such a world of wonders? Of course. Everyone did. Do I feel cheated now? It seemed unlikely that I'd live to see all the things I was reading about in science fiction, but it never occurred to me that I wouldn't see any of them.

At the turn of the millennium, I was expecting an outpouring of reflections on why we had gotten the future of technology so wrong. Instead, just about all the authoritative voices—both Left and Right—began their reflections from the assumption that we do live in an unprecedented new technological utopia of one sort or another.

The common way of dealing with the uneasy sense that this might not be so is to brush it aside, to insist all the progress that could have happened has happened and to treat anything more as silly. "Oh, you mean all that Jetsons stuff?" I'm asked—as if to say, but that was just for children! Surely, as grown-ups, we understand The Jetsons offered as accurate a view of the future as The Flintstones offered of the Stone Age.

Surely, as grown-ups, we understand The Jetsons offered as accurate a view of the future as The Flintstones did of the Stone Age.

Even in the seventies and eighties, in fact, sober sources such as National Geographic and the Smithsonian were informing children of imminent space stations and expeditions to Mars. Creators of science fiction movies used to come up with concrete dates, often no more than a generation in the future, in which to place their futuristic fantasies. In 1968, Stanley Kubrick felt that a moviegoing audience would find it perfectly natural to assume that only thirty-three years later, in 2001, we would have commercial moon flights, city-like space stations, and computers with human personalities maintaining astronauts in suspended animation while traveling to Jupiter. Video telephony is just about the only new technology from that particular movie that has appeared—and it was technically possible when the movie was showing. 2001 can be seen as a curio, but what about Star Trek? The Star Trek mythos was set in the sixties, too, but the show kept getting revived, leaving audiences for Star Trek Voyager in, say, 2005, to try to figure out what to make of the fact that according to the logic of the program, the world was supposed to be recovering from fighting off the rule of genetically engineered supermen in the Eugenics Wars of the nineties.

By 1989, when the creators of Back to the Future II were dutifully placing flying cars and anti-gravity hoverboards in the hands of ordinary teenagers in the year 2015, it wasn't clear if this was meant as a prediction or a joke.

The usual move in science fiction is to remain vague about the dates, so as to render "the future" a zone of pure fantasy, no different than Middle Earth or Narnia, or like Star Wars, "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." As a result, our science fiction future is, most

often, not a future at all, but more like an alternative dimension, a dream-time, a technological Elsewhere, existing in days to come in the same sense that elves and dragon-slayers existed in the past—another screen for the displacement of moral dramas and mythic fantasies into the dead ends of consumer pleasure.

Might the cultural sensibility that came to be referred to as postmodernism best be seen as a prolonged meditation on all the technological changes that never happened? The question struck me as I watched one of the recent Star Wars movies. The movie was terrible, but I couldn't help but feel impressed by the quality of the special effects. Recalling the clumsy special effects typical of fifties sci-fi films, I kept thinking how impressed a fifties audience would have been if they'd known what we could do by now—only to realize, "Actually, no. They wouldn't be impressed at all, would they? They thought we'd be doing this kind of thing by now. Not just figuring out more sophisticated ways to simulate it."

That last word—simulate—is key. The technologies that have advanced since the seventies are mainly either medical technologies or information technologies—largely, technologies of simulation. They are technologies of what Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco called the "hyper-real," the ability to make imitations that are more realistic than originals. The postmodern sensibility, the feeling that we had somehow broken into an unprecedented new historical period in which we understood that there is nothing new; that grand historical narratives of progress and liberation were meaningless; that everything now was simulation, ironic repetition, fragmentation, and pastiche—all this makes sense in a technological environment in which the only breakthroughs were those that made it easier to create, transfer, and rearrange virtual projections of things that either already existed, or, we came to realize, never would. Surely, if we were vacationing in geodesic domes on Mars or toting about pocket-size nuclear fusion plants or telekinetic mind-reading devices no one would ever have been talking like this. The postmodern moment was a desperate way to take what could otherwise only be felt as a bitter disappointment and to dress it up as something epochal, exciting, and new.

In the earliest formulations, which largely came out of the Marxist tradition, a lot of this technological background was acknowledged. Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" proposed the term "postmodernism" to refer to the cultural logic appropriate to a new, technological phase of capitalism, one that had been

heralded by Marxist economist Ernest Mandel as early as 1972. Mandel had argued that humanity stood at the verge of a “third technological revolution,” as profound as the Agricultural or Industrial Revolution, in which computers, robots, new energy sources, and new information technologies would replace industrial labor—the “end of work” as it soon came to be called—reducing us all to designers and computer technicians coming up with crazy visions that cybernetic factories would produce.

End of work arguments were popular in the late seventies and early eighties as social thinkers pondered what would happen to the traditional working-class-led popular struggle once the working class no longer existed. (The answer: it would turn into identity politics.) Jameson thought of himself as exploring the forms of consciousness and historical sensibilities likely to emerge from this new age.

What happened, instead, is that the spread of information technologies and new ways of organizing transport—the containerization of shipping, for example—allowed those same industrial jobs to be outsourced to East Asia, Latin America, and other countries where the availability of cheap labor allowed manufacturers to employ much less technologically sophisticated production-line techniques than they would have been obliged to employ at home.

From the perspective of those living in Europe, North America, and Japan, the results did seem to be much as predicted. Smokestack industries did disappear; jobs came to be divided between a lower stratum of service workers and an upper stratum sitting in antiseptic bubbles playing with computers. But below it all lay an uneasy awareness that the postwork civilization was a giant fraud. Our carefully engineered high-tech sneakers were not being produced by intelligent cyborgs or self-replicating molecular nanotechnology; they were being made on the equivalent of old-fashioned Singer sewing machines, by the daughters of Mexican and Indonesian farmers who, as the result of WTO or NAFTA–sponsored trade deals, had been ousted from their ancestral lands. It was a guilty awareness that lay beneath the postmodern sensibility and its celebration of the endless play of images and surfaces.

Why did the projected explosion of technological growth everyone was expecting—the moon bases, the robot factories—fail to happen? There are two possibilities. Either our expectations about the pace of technological change were unrealistic (in which case, we need to know why so many intelligent people believed they were not) or our expectations were not unrealistic (in which case, we need to know what happened to derail so many credible ideas and prospects).

Most social analysts choose the first explanation and trace the problem to the Cold War space race. Why, these analysts wonder, did both the United States and the Soviet Union become so obsessed with the idea of manned space travel? It was never an efficient way to engage in scientific research. And it encouraged unrealistic ideas of what the human future would be like.

Could the answer be that both the United States and the Soviet Union had been, in the century before, societies of pioneers, one expanding across the Western frontier, the other across Siberia? Didn't they share a commitment to the myth of a limitless, expansive future, of human colonization of vast empty spaces, that helped convince the leaders of both superpowers they had entered into a "space age" in which they were battling over control of the future itself? All sorts of myths were at play here, no doubt, but that proves nothing about the feasibility of the project.

Some of those science fiction fantasies (at this point we can't know which ones) could have been brought into being. For earlier generations, many science fiction fantasies had been brought into being. Those who grew up at the turn of the century reading Jules Verne or H.G. Wells imagined the world of, say, 1960 with flying machines, rocket ships, submarines, radio, and television—and that was pretty much what they got. If it wasn't unrealistic in 1900 to dream of men traveling to the moon, then why was it unrealistic in the sixties to dream of jet-packs and robot laundry-maids?

In fact, even as those dreams were being outlined, the material base for their achievement was beginning to be whittled away. There is reason to believe that even by the fifties and sixties, the pace of technological innovation was slowing down from the heady pace of the first half of the century. There was a last spate in the fifties when microwave ovens (1954), the Pill (1957), and lasers (1958) all appeared in rapid succession. But since then, technological advances have taken the form of clever new ways of combining existing technologies (as in the space race) and new ways of putting existing technologies to consumer use (the most famous example is television, invented in 1926, but mass produced only after the war.) Yet, in part because the space race gave everyone the impression that remarkable advances were happening, the popular impression during the sixties was that the pace of technological change was speeding up in terrifying, uncontrollable ways.

Alvin Toffler's 1970 best seller Future Shock argued that almost all the social problems of the sixties could be traced back to the increasing pace of technological change. The endless outpouring of scientific breakthroughs transformed the grounds of daily existence, and left Americans without any clear idea of what normal life was. Just consider the family, where not just the Pill, but also the prospect of in vitro fertilization, test tube babies, and sperm and egg donation were about to make the idea of motherhood obsolete.

Humans were not psychologically prepared for the pace of change, Toffler wrote. He coined a term for the phenomenon: "accelerative thrust." It had begun with the Industrial Revolution, but by roughly 1850, the effect had become unmistakable. Not only was everything around us changing, but most of it—human knowledge, the size of the population, industrial growth, energy use—was changing exponentially. The only solution, Toffler argued, was to begin some kind of control over the process, to create institutions that would assess emerging technologies and their likely effects, to ban technologies likely to be too socially disruptive, and to guide development in the direction of social harmony.

While many of the historical trends Toffler describes are accurate, the book appeared when most of these exponential trends halted. It was right around 1970 when the increase in the number of scientific papers published in the world—a figure that had doubled every fifteen years since, roughly, 1685—began leveling off. The same was true of books and patents.

Toffler's use of acceleration was particularly unfortunate. For most of human history, the top speed at which human beings could travel had been around 25 miles per hour. By 1900 it had increased to 100 miles per hour, and for the next seventy years it did seem to be increasing exponentially. By the time Toffler was writing, in 1970, the record for the fastest speed at which any human had traveled stood at roughly 25,000 mph, achieved by the crew of Apollo 10 in 1969, just one year before. At such an exponential rate, it must have seemed reasonable to assume that within a matter of decades, humanity would be exploring other solar systems.

Since 1970, no further increase has occurred. The record for the fastest a human has ever traveled remains with the crew of Apollo 10. True, the commercial airliner Concorde, which first flew in 1969, reached a maximum speed of 1,400 mph. And the Soviet Tupolev Tu-144, which flew first, reached an even faster speed of 1,553 mph. But those speeds not only have failed to increase; they have decreased since the Tupolev Tu-144 was cancelled and the Concorde was abandoned.

None of this stopped Toffler's own career. He kept retooling his analysis to come up with new spectacular pronouncements. In 1980, he produced The Third Wave, its argument lifted from Ernest Mandel's "third technological revolution"—except that while Mandel thought these changes would spell the end of capitalism, Toffler assumed capitalism was eternal. By 1990, Toffler was the personal intellectual guru to Republican congressman Newt Gingrich, who claimed that his 1994 "Contract With America" was inspired, in part, by the understanding that the United States needed to move from an antiquated, materialist, industrial mind-set to a new, free-market, information age, Third Wave civilization.

There are all sorts of ironies in this connection. One of Toffler's greatest achievements was inspiring the government to create an Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). One of Gingrich's first acts on winning control of the House of Representatives in 1995 was defunding the OTA as an example of useless government extravagance. Still, there's no contradiction here. By this time, Toffler had long since given up on influencing policy by appealing to the general public; he was making a living largely by giving seminars to CEOs and corporate think tanks. His insights had been privatized.

Gingrich liked to call himself a "conservative futurologist." This, too, might seem oxymoronic; but, in fact, Toffler's own conception of futurology was never progressive. Progress was always presented as a problem that needed to be solved.

Toffler might best be seen as a lightweight version of the nineteenth-century social theorist Auguste Comte, who believed that he was standing on the brink of a new age—in his case, the Industrial Age—driven by the inexorable progress of technology, and that the social cataclysms of his times were caused by the social system not adjusting. The older feudal order had developed Catholic theology, a way of thinking about man's place in the cosmos perfectly suited to the social system of the time, as well as an institutional structure, the Church, that conveyed and enforced such ideas in a way that could give everyone a sense of meaning and belonging. The Industrial Age had developed its own system of ideas—science—but scientists had not succeeded in creating anything like the Catholic Church. Comte concluded that we needed to develop a new science, which he dubbed "sociology," and said that sociologists should play the role of priests in a new Religion of Society that would inspire everyone with a love of order, community, work discipline, and family values. Toffler was less ambitious; his futurologists were not supposed to play the

role of priests.

Gingrich had a second guru, a libertarian theologian named George Gilder, and Gilder, like Toffler, was obsessed with technology and social change. In an odd way, Gilder was more optimistic. Embracing a radical version of Mandel's Third Wave argument, he insisted that what we were seeing with the rise of computers was an "overthrow of matter." The old, materialist Industrial Society, where value came from physical labor, was giving way to an Information Age where value emerges directly from the minds of entrepreneurs, just as the world had originally appeared ex nihilo from the mind of God, just as money, in a proper supply-side economy, emerged ex nihilo from the Federal Reserve and into the hands of value-creating capitalists. Supply-side economic policies, Gilder concluded, would ensure that investment would continue to steer away from old government boondoggles like the space program and toward more productive information and medical technologies.

But if there was a conscious, or semi-conscious, move away from investment in research that might lead to better rockets and robots, and toward research that would lead to such things as laser printers and CAT scans, it had begun well before Toffler's Future Shock (1970) and Gilder's Wealth and Poverty (1981). What their success shows is that the issues they raised—that existing patterns of technological development would lead to social upheaval, and that we needed to guide technological development in directions that did not challenge existing structures of authority—echoed in the corridors of power. Statesmen and captains of industry had been thinking about such questions for some time.

Industrial capitalism has fostered an extremely rapid rate of scientific advance and technological innovation—one with no parallel in previous human history. Even capitalism's greatest detractors, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, celebrated its unleashing of the "productive forces." Marx and Engels also believed that capitalism's continual need to revolutionize the means of industrial production would be its undoing. Marx argued that, for

certain technical reasons, value—and therefore profits—can be extracted only from human labor. Competition forces factory owners to mechanize production, to reduce labor costs, but while this is to the short-term advantage of the firm, mechanization's effect is to drive down the general rate of profit.

For 150 years, economists have debated whether all this is true. But if it is true, then the decision by industrialists not to pour research funds into the invention of the robot factories that everyone was anticipating in the sixties, and instead to relocate their factories to labor-intensive, low-tech facilities in China or the Global South makes a great deal of sense.

As I've noted, there's reason to believe the pace of technological innovation in productive processes—the factories themselves—began to slow in the fifties and sixties, but the side effects of America's rivalry with the Soviet Union made innovation appear to accelerate. There was the awesome space race, alongside frenetic efforts by U.S. industrial planners to apply existing technologies to consumer purposes, to create an optimistic sense of burgeoning prosperity and guaranteed progress that would undercut the appeal of working-class politics.

These moves were reactions to initiatives from the Soviet Union. But this part of the history is difficult for Americans to remember, because at the end of the Cold War, the popular image of the Soviet Union switched from terrifyingly bold rival to pathetic basket case—the exemplar of a society that could not work. Back in the fifties, in fact, many United States planners suspected the Soviet system worked better. Certainly, they recalled the fact that in the thirties, while the United States had been mired in depression, the Soviet Union had maintained almost unprecedented economic growth rates of 10 percent to 12 percent a year—an achievement quickly followed by the production of tank armies that defeated Nazi Germany, then by the launching of Sputnik in 1957, then by the first manned spacecraft, the Vostok, in 1961.

It's often said the Apollo moon landing was the greatest historical achievement of Soviet communism. Surely, the United States would never have contemplated such a feat had it not been for the cosmic ambitions of the Soviet Politburo. We are used to thinking of the Politburo as a group of unimaginative gray bureaucrats, but they were bureaucrats who dared to dream astounding dreams. The dream of world revolution was only the first. It's also true that most of them—changing the course of mighty rivers, this sort of thing—either turned out to be ecologically and socially disastrous, or, like Joseph Stalin's one-hundred-story Palace of the Soviets or a twenty-story statue of Vladimir Lenin, never got off the ground.

After the initial successes of the Soviet space program, few of these schemes were realized, but the leadership never ceased coming up with new ones. Even in the eighties, when the

United States was attempting its own last, grandiose scheme, Star Wars, the Soviets were planning to transform the world through creative uses of technology. Few outside of Russia remember most of these projects, but great resources were devoted to them. It's also worth noting that unlike the Star Wars project, which was designed to sink the Soviet Union, most were not military in nature: as, for instance, the attempt to solve the world hunger problem by harvesting lakes and oceans with an edible bacteria called spirulina, or to solve the world energy problem by launching hundreds of gigantic solar-power platforms into orbit and beaming the electricity back to earth.

The American victory in the space race meant that, after 1968, U.S. planners no longer took the competition seriously. As a result, the mythology of the final frontier was maintained, even as the direction of research and development shifted away from anything that might lead to the creation of Mars bases and robot factories.

The standard line is that all this was a result of the triumph of the market. The Apollo program was a Big Government project, Soviet-inspired in the sense that it required a national effort coordinated by government bureaucracies. As soon as the Soviet threat drew safely out of the picture, though, capitalism was free to revert to lines of technological development more in accord with its normal, decentralized, free-market imperatives—such as privately funded research into marketable products like personal computers. This is the line that men like Toffler and Gilder took in the late seventies and early eighties.

In fact, the United States never did abandon gigantic, government-controlled schemes of technological development. Mainly, they just shifted to military research—and not just to Soviet-scale schemes like Star Wars, but to weapons projects, research in communications and surveillance technologies, and similar security-related concerns. To some degree this had always been true: the billions poured into missile research had always dwarfed the sums allocated to the space program. Yet by the seventies, even basic research came to be conducted following military priorities. One reason we don't have robot factories is because roughly 95 percent of robotics research funding has been channeled through the Pentagon, which is more interested in developing unmanned drones than in automating paper mills.

A case could be made that even the shift to research and development on information technologies and medicine was not so much a reorientation toward market-driven consumer imperatives, but part of an all-out effort to follow the technological humbling of the Soviet Union with total victory in the global class war—seen simultaneously as the imposition of absolute U.S. military dominance overseas, and, at home, the utter rout of social movements.

For the technologies that did emerge proved most conducive to surveillance, work discipline, and social control. Computers have opened up certain spaces of freedom, as

we’re constantly reminded, but instead of leading to the workless utopia Abbie Hoffman imagined, they have been employed in such a way as to produce the opposite effect. They have enabled a financialization of capital that has driven workers desperately into debt, and, at the same time, provided the means by which employers have created “flexible” work regimes that have both destroyed traditional job security and increased working hours for almost everyone. Along with the export of factory jobs, the new work regime has routed the union movement and destroyed any possibility of effective working-class politics.

Meanwhile, despite unprecedented investment in research on medicine and life sciences, we await cures for cancer and the common cold, and the most dramatic medical breakthroughs we have seen have taken the form of drugs such as Prozac, Zoloft, or Ritalin—tailor-made to ensure that the new work demands don’t drive us completely, dysfunctionally crazy.

With results like these, what will the epitaph for neoliberalism look like? I think historians will conclude it was a form of capitalism that systematically prioritized political imperatives over economic ones. Given a choice between a course of action that would make capitalism seem the only possible economic system, and one that would transform capitalism into a viable, long-term economic system, neoliberalism chooses the former every time. There is every reason to believe that destroying job security while increasing working hours does not create a more productive (let alone more innovative or loyal) workforce. Probably, in economic terms, the result is negative—an impression confirmed by lower growth rates in just about all parts of the world in the eighties and nineties.

But the neoliberal choice has been effective in depoliticizing labor and overdetermining the future. Economically, the growth of armies, police, and private security services amounts to dead weight. It’s possible, in fact, that the very dead weight of the apparatus created to ensure the ideological victory of capitalism will sink it. But it’s also easy to see how choking off any sense of an inevitable, redemptive future that could be different from our world is a crucial part of the neoliberal project.

At this point all the pieces would seem to be falling neatly into place. By the sixties, conservative political forces were growing skittish about the socially disruptive effects of technological progress, and employers were beginning to worry about the economic impact of mechanization. The fading Soviet threat allowed for a reallocation of resources in directions seen as less challenging to social and economic arrangements, or indeed directions that could support a campaign of reversing the gains of progressive social movements and achieving a decisive victory in what U.S. elites saw as a global class war. The change of priorities was introduced as a withdrawal of big-government projects and a return to the market, but in fact the change shifted government-directed research away from programs like NASA or alternative energy sources and toward military, information, and medical technologies.

Of course this doesn't explain everything. Above all, it does not explain why, even in those areas that have become the focus of well-funded research projects, we have not seen anything like the kind of advances anticipated fifty years ago. If 95 percent of robotics research has been funded by the military, then where are the Klaatu-style killer robots shooting death rays from their eyes?

Obviously, there have been advances in military technology in recent decades. One of the reasons we all survived the Cold War is that while nuclear bombs might have worked as advertised, their delivery systems did not; intercontinental ballistic missiles weren't capable of striking cities, let alone specific targets inside cities, and this fact meant there was little point in launching a nuclear first strike unless you intended to destroy the world.

Contemporary cruise missiles are accurate by comparison. Still, precision weapons never do seem capable of assassinating specific individuals (Saddam, Osama, Qaddafi), even when hundreds are dropped. And ray guns have not materialized—surely not for lack of trying. We can assume the Pentagon has spent billions on death ray research, but the closest they've come so far are lasers that might, if aimed correctly, blind an enemy gunner looking directly at the beam. Aside from being unsporting, this is pathetic: lasers are a fifties technology. Phasers that can be set to stun do not appear to be on the drawing boards; and when it comes to infantry combat, the preferred weapon almost everywhere remains the AK-47, a Soviet design named for the year it was introduced: 1947.

The Internet is a remarkable innovation, but all we are talking about is a super-fast and globally accessible combination of library, post office, and mail-order catalogue. Had the Internet been described to a science fiction aficionado in the fifties and sixties and touted as the most dramatic technological achievement since his time, his reaction would have been disappointment. Fifty years and this is the best our scientists managed to come up with? We expected computers that would think!

Overall, levels of research funding have increased dramatically since the seventies. Admittedly, the proportion of that funding that comes from the corporate sector has increased most dramatically, to the point that private enterprise is now funding twice as much research as the government, but the increase is so large that the total amount of government research funding, in real-dollar terms, is much higher than it was in the sixties. “Basic,” “curiosity-driven,” or “blue skies” research—the kind that is not driven by the prospect of any immediate practical application, and that is most likely to lead to unexpected breakthroughs—occupies an ever smaller proportion of the total, though so much money is being thrown around nowadays that overall levels of basic research funding have increased.

Yet most observers agree that the results have been paltry. Certainly we no longer see anything like the continual stream of conceptual revolutions—genetic inheritance, relativity, psychoanalysis, quantum mechanics—that people had grown used to, and even expected, a hundred years before. Why?

Part of the answer has to do with the concentration of resources on a handful of gigantic projects: “big science,” as it has come to be called. The Human Genome Project is often held out as an example. After spending almost three billion dollars and employing thousands of scientists and staff in five different countries, it has mainly served to establish that there isn’t very much to be learned from sequencing genes that’s of much use to anyone else. Even more, the hype and political investment surrounding such projects demonstrate the degree to which even basic research now seems to be driven by political, administrative, and marketing imperatives that make it unlikely anything revolutionary will happen.

Here, our fascination with the mythic origins of Silicon Valley and the Internet has blinded us to what’s really going on. It has allowed us to imagine that research and development is now driven, primarily, by small teams of plucky entrepreneurs, or the sort of decentralized cooperation that creates open-source software. This is not so, even though such research teams are most likely to produce results. Research and development is still driven by giant bureaucratic projects.

What has changed is the bureaucratic culture. The increasing interpenetration of government, university, and private firms has led everyone to adopt the language, sensibilities, and organizational forms that originated in the corporate world. Although this might have helped in creating marketable products, since that is what corporate bureaucracies are designed to do, in terms of fostering original research, the results have been catastrophic.

My own knowledge comes from universities, both in the United States and Britain. In both countries, the last thirty years have seen a veritable explosion of the proportion of working

hours spent on administrative tasks at the expense of pretty much everything else. In my own university, for instance, we have more administrators than faculty members, and the faculty members, too, are expected to spend at least as much time on administration as on teaching and research combined. The same is true, more or less, at universities worldwide.

The growth of administrative work has directly resulted from introducing corporate management techniques. Invariably, these are justified as ways of increasing efficiency and introducing competition at every level. What they end up meaning in practice is that everyone winds up spending most of their time trying to sell things: grant proposals; book proposals; assessments of students' jobs and grant applications; assessments of our colleagues; prospectuses for new interdisciplinary majors; institutes; conference workshops; universities themselves (which have now become brands to be marketed to prospective students or contributors); and so on.

As marketing overwhelms university life, it generates documents about fostering imagination and creativity that might just as well have been designed to strangle imagination and creativity in the cradle. No major new works of social theory have emerged in the United States in the last thirty years. We have been reduced to the equivalent of medieval scholastics, writing endless annotations of French theory from the seventies, despite the guilty awareness that if new incarnations of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, or Pierre Bourdieu were to appear in the academy today, we would deny them tenure.

There was a time when academia was society's refuge for the eccentric, brilliant, and impractical. No longer. It is now the domain of professional self-marketers. As a result, in one of the most bizarre fits of social self-destructiveness in history, we seem to have decided we have no place for our eccentric, brilliant, and impractical citizens. Most languish in their mothers' basements, at best making the occasional, acute intervention on the Internet.

If all this is true in the social sciences, where research is still carried out with minimal

overhead largely by individuals, one can imagine how much worse it is for astrophysicists. And, indeed, one astrophysicist, Jonathan Katz, has recently warned students pondering a career in the sciences. Even if you do emerge from the usual decade-long period languishing as someone else's flunky, he says, you can expect your best ideas to be stymied at every point:

You will spend your time writing proposals rather than doing research. Worse, because your proposals are judged by your competitors, you cannot follow your curiosity, but must spend your effort and talents on anticipating and deflecting criticism rather than on solving the important scientific problems. . . . It is proverbial that original ideas are the kiss of death for a proposal, because they have not yet been proved to work.

That pretty much answers the question of why we don't have teleportation devices or antigravity shoes. Common sense suggests that if you want to maximize scientific creativity, you find some bright people, give them the resources they need to pursue whatever idea comes into their heads, and then leave them alone. Most will turn up nothing, but one or two may well discover something. But if you want to minimize the possibility of unexpected breakthroughs, tell those same people they will receive no resources at all unless they spend the bulk of their time competing against each other to convince you they know in advance what they are going to discover.

In the natural sciences, to the tyranny of managerialism we can add the privatization of research results. As the British economist David Harvie has reminded us, "open source" research is not new. Scholarly research has always been open source, in the sense that scholars share materials and results. There is competition, certainly, but it is "convivial." This is no longer true of scientists working in the corporate sector, where findings are jealously guarded, but the spread of the corporate ethos within the academy and research institutes themselves has caused even publicly funded scholars to treat their findings as personal property. Academic publishers ensure that findings that are published are increasingly difficult to access, further enclosing the intellectual commons. As a result, convivial, open-source competition turns into something much more like classic market competition.

There are many forms of privatization, up to and including the simple buying up and suppression of inconvenient discoveries by large corporations fearful of their economic effects. (We cannot know how many synthetic fuel formulae have been bought up and placed in the vaults of oil companies, but it's hard to imagine nothing like this happens.) More subtle is the way the managerial ethos discourages everything adventurous or quirky, especially if there is no prospect of immediate results. Oddly, the Internet can be part of the problem here. As Neal Stephenson put it:

Most people who work in corporations or academia have witnessed something like the following: A number of engineers are sitting together in a room, bouncing ideas off each other. Out of the discussion emerges a new concept that seems promising. Then some laptop-wielding person in the corner, having performed a quick Google search, announces that this "new" idea is, in fact, an old one; it—or at least something vaguely similar—has already been tried. Either it failed, or it succeeded. If it failed, then no manager who wants to keep his or her job will approve spending money trying to revive it. If it succeeded, then it's patented and entry to the market is presumed to be unattainable, since the first people who thought of it will have "first-mover advantage" and will have created "barriers to entry." The number of seemingly promising ideas that have been crushed in this way must number in the millions.

And so a timid, bureaucratic spirit suffuses every aspect of cultural life. It comes festooned in a language of creativity, initiative, and entrepreneurialism. But the language is meaningless. Those thinkers most likely to make a conceptual breakthrough are the least likely to receive funding, and, if breakthroughs occur, they are not likely to find anyone willing to follow up on their most daring implications.

Giovanni Arrighi has noted that after the South Sea Bubble, British capitalism largely abandoned the corporate form. By the time of the Industrial Revolution, Britain had instead come to rely on a combination of high finance and small family firms—a pattern that held throughout the next century, the period of maximum scientific and technological innovation. (Britain at that time was also notorious for being just as generous to its oddballs and eccentrics as contemporary America is intolerant. A common expedient was to allow them to become rural vicars, who, predictably, became one of the main sources for amateur scientific discoveries.)

Contemporary, bureaucratic corporate capitalism was a creation not of Britain, but of the United States and Germany, the two rival powers that spent the first half of the twentieth century fighting two bloody wars over who would replace Britain as a dominant world power—wars that culminated, appropriately enough, in government-sponsored scientific programs to see who would be the first to discover the atom bomb. It is significant, then, that our current technological stagnation seems to have begun after 1945, when the United States replaced Britain as organizer of the world economy.

Americans do not like to think of themselves as a nation of bureaucrats—quite the opposite—but the moment we stop imagining bureaucracy as a phenomenon limited to government offices, it becomes obvious that this is precisely what we have become. The final victory over the Soviet Union did not lead to the domination of the market, but, in fact, cemented the dominance of conservative managerial elites, corporate bureaucrats who use the pretext of short-term, competitive, bottom-line thinking to squelch anything likely to

have revolutionary implications of any kind.

If we do not notice that we live in a bureaucratic society, that is because bureaucratic norms and practices have become so all-pervasive that we cannot see them, or, worse, cannot imagine doing things any other way.

Computers have played a crucial role in this narrowing of our social imaginations. Just as the invention of new forms of industrial automation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had the paradoxical effect of turning more and more of the world's population into full-time industrial workers, so has all the software designed to save us from administrative responsibilities turned us into part- or full-time administrators. In the same way that university professors seem to feel it is inevitable they will spend more of their time managing grants, so affluent housewives simply accept that they will spend weeks every year filling out forty-page online forms to get their children into grade schools. We all spend increasing amounts of time punching passwords into our phones to manage bank and credit accounts and learning how to perform jobs once performed by travel agents, brokers, and accountants.

Someone once figured out that the average American will spend a cumulative six months of life waiting for traffic lights to change. I don't know if similar figures are available for how long it takes to fill out forms, but it must be at least as long. No population in the history of the world has spent nearly so much time engaged in paperwork.

In this final, stultifying stage of capitalism, we are moving from poetic technologies to bureaucratic technologies. By poetic technologies I refer to the use of rational and technical means to bring wild fantasies to reality. Poetic technologies, so understood, are as old as civilization. Lewis Mumford noted that the first complex machines were made of people. Egyptian pharaohs were able to build the pyramids only because of their mastery of administrative procedures, which allowed them to develop production-line techniques, dividing up complex tasks into dozens of simple operations and assigning each to one team

of workmen—even though they lacked mechanical technology more complex than the inclined plane and lever. Administrative oversight turned armies of peasant farmers into the cogs of a vast machine. Much later, after cogs had been invented, the design of complex machinery elaborated principles originally developed to organize people.

Yet we have seen those machines—whether their moving parts are arms and torsos or pistons, wheels, and springs—being put to work to realize impossible fantasies: cathedrals, moon shots, transcontinental railways. Certainly, poetic technologies had something terrible about them; the poetry is likely to be as much of dark satanic mills as of grace or liberation. But the rational, administrative techniques were always in service to some fantastic end.

From this perspective, all those mad Soviet plans—even if never realized—marked the climax of poetic technologies. What we have now is the reverse. It's not that vision, creativity, and mad fantasies are no longer encouraged, but that most remain free-floating; there's no longer even the pretense that they could ever take form or flesh. The greatest and most powerful nation that has ever existed has spent the last decades telling its citizens they can no longer contemplate fantastic collective enterprises, even if—as the environmental crisis demands— the fate of the earth depends on it.

What are the political implications of all this? First of all, we need to rethink some of our most basic assumptions about the nature of capitalism. One is that capitalism is identical with the market, and that both therefore are inimical to bureaucracy, which is supposed to be a creature of the state.

The second assumption is that capitalism is in its nature technologically progressive. It would seem that Marx and Engels, in their giddy enthusiasm for the industrial revolutions of their day, were wrong about this. Or, to be more precise: they were right to insist that the mechanization of industrial production would destroy capitalism; they were wrong to predict that market competition would compel factory owners to mechanize anyway. If it didn't happen, that is because market competition is not, in fact, as essential to the nature of capitalism as they had assumed. If nothing else, the current form of capitalism, where much of the competition seems to take the form of internal marketing within the bureaucratic structures of large semi-monopolistic enterprises, would come as a complete surprise to them.

Defenders of capitalism make three broad historical claims: first, that it has fostered rapid scientific and technological growth; second, that however much it may throw enormous wealth to a small minority, it does so in such a way as to increase overall prosperity; third, that in doing so, it creates a more secure and democratic world for everyone. It is clear that capitalism is not doing any of these things any longer. In fact, many of its defenders are retreating from claiming that it is a good system and instead falling back on the claim that it

is the only possible system—or, at least, the only possible system for a complex, technologically sophisticated society such as our own.

But how could anyone argue that current economic arrangements are also the only ones that will ever be viable under any possible future technological society? The argument is absurd. How could anyone know?

Granted, there are people who take that position—on both ends of the political spectrum. As an anthropologist and anarchist, I encounter anticivilizational types who insist not only that current industrial technology leads only to capitalist-style oppression, but that this must necessarily be true of any future technology as well, and therefore that human liberation can be achieved only by returning to the Stone Age. Most of us are not technological determinists.

But claims for the inevitability of capitalism have to be based on a kind of technological determinism. And for that very reason, if the aim of neoliberal capitalism is to create a world in which no one believes any other economic system could work, then it needs to suppress not just any idea of an inevitable redemptive future, but any radically different technological future. Yet there's a contradiction. Defenders of capitalism cannot mean to convince us that technological change has ended—since that would mean capitalism is not progressive. No, they mean to convince us that technological progress is indeed continuing, that we do live in a world of wonders, but that those wonders take the form of modest improvements (the latest iPhone!), rumors of inventions about to happen ("I hear they are going to have flying cars pretty soon"), complex ways of juggling information and imagery, and still more complex platforms for filling out of forms.

I do not mean to suggest that neoliberal capitalism—or any other system—can be successful in this regard. First, there's the problem of trying to convince the world you are leading the way in technological progress when you are holding it back. The United States, with its decaying infrastructure, paralysis in the face of global warming, and symbolically devastating abandonment of its manned space program just as China accelerates its own, is doing a particularly bad public relations job. Second, the pace of change can't be held back forever. Breakthroughs will happen; inconvenient discoveries cannot be permanently suppressed. Other, less bureaucratized parts of the world—or at least, parts of the world with bureaucracies that are not so hostile to creative thinking—will slowly but inevitably attain the resources required to pick up where the United States and its allies have left off. The Internet does provide opportunities for collaboration and dissemination that may help break us through the wall as well. Where will the breakthrough come? We can't know. Maybe 3D printing will do what the robot factories were supposed to. Or maybe it will be something else. But it will happen.

About one conclusion we can feel especially confident: it will not happen within the framework of contemporary corporate capitalism—or any form of capitalism. To begin setting up domes on Mars, let alone to develop the means to figure out if there are alien civilizations to contact, we're going to have to figure out a different economic system. Must the new system take the form of some massive new bureaucracy? Why do we assume it must? Only by breaking up existing bureaucratic structures can we begin. And if we're going to invent robots that will do our laundry and tidy up the kitchen, then we're going to have to make sure that whatever replaces capitalism is based on a far more egalitarian distribution of wealth and power—one that no longer contains either the super-rich or the desperately poor willing to do their housework. Only then will technology begin to be marshaled toward human needs. And this is the best reason to break free of the dead hand of the hedge fund managers and the CEOs—to free our fantasies from the screens in which such men have imprisoned them, to let our imaginations once again become a material force in human history.

Achille Mbembe: The age of humanism is ending

This article was originally published on Dec 22, 2016 in Mail & Guardian.

There is no sign that 2017 will be much different from 2016.

Under Israeli occupation for decades, Gaza will still be the biggest open prison on Earth.

In the United States, the killing of black people at the hands of the police will proceed unabated and hundreds of thousands more will join those already housed in the prison-industrial complex that came on the heels of plantation slavery and Jim Crow laws.

Europe will continue its slow descent into liberal authoritarianism or what cultural theorist Stuart Hall called authoritarian populism. Despite complex agreements reached at international forums, the ecological destruction of the Earth will continue and the war on terror will increasingly morph into a war of extermination between various forms of nihilism.

Inequalities will keep growing worldwide. But far from fuelling a renewed cycle of class struggles, social conflicts will increasingly take the form of racism, ultra nationalism, sexism, ethnic and religious rivalries, xenophobia, homophobia and other deadly passions.

The denigration of virtues such as care, compassion and kindness will go hand in hand with the belief, especially among the poor, that winning is all that matters and who wins — by whatever means necessary — is ultimately right.

With the triumph of this neo-Darwinian approach to history-making, apartheid under various guises will be restored as the new old norm. Its restoration will pave the way to new separatist impulses, the erection of more walls, the militarisation of more borders, deadly forms of policing, more asymmetrical wars, splitting alliances and countless internal divisions including in established democracies.

None of the above is accidental. If anything, it is a symptom of structural shifts, which will become ever more apparent as the new century unfolds. The world as we knew it since the end of World War II, the long years of decolonisation, the Cold War and the defeat of communism has ended.

Another long and deadlier game has started. The main clash of the first half of the 21st century will not oppose religions or civilisations. It will oppose liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism, the rule of finance and the rule of the people, humanism and nihilism.

Capitalism and liberal democracy triumphed over fascism in 1945 and over communism in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the advent of globalisation, their fates were disentangled. The widening bifurcation of demo-cracy and capital is the new threat to civilisation.

Abetted by technological and military might, finance capital has achieved its hegemony over the world by annexing the core of human desires and, in the process, by turning itself into the first global secular theology. Fusing the attributes of a technology and a religion, it relied on uncontested dogmas modern forms of capitalism had reluctantly shared with democracy since the post-war period — individual liberty, market competition and the rule of the commodity and of property, the cult of science, technology and reason.

Each of these articles of faith is under threat. At its core, liberal democracy is not compatible with the inner logic of finance capitalism. The clash between these two ideas and principles is likely to be the most signifying event of the first half of a 21st-century political landscape — a landscape shaped less by the rule of reason than by the general release of passions, emotions and affect.

In this new landscape, knowledge will be defined as knowledge for the market. The market itself will be re-imagined as the primary mechanism for the validation of truth.

As markets themselves are increasingly turning into algorithmic structures and technologies, the only useful knowledge will be algorithmic.

Instead of people with body, history and flesh, statistical inferences will be all that count. Statistics and other big data will mostly be derived from computation.

As a result of the conflation of knowledge, technology and markets, contempt will be extended to anyone who has nothing to sell.

The humanistic and Enlightenment notion of the rational subject capable of deliberation and choice will be replaced by the consciously deliberating and choosing consumer.

Already in the making, a new kind of human will triumph. This will not be the liberal individual who, not so long ago, we believed could be the subject of democracy. The new human being will be constituted through and within digital technologies and computational media.

The computational age — the age of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter — is dominated by the idea that there are clean slates in the unconscious. New media forms have not only lifted the lid previous cultural eras had put on the unconscious. They have become the new infrastructures of the unconscious.

Yesterday, human sociality consisted of keeping tabs on the unconscious. For the social to thrive meant exercising vigilance on ourselves, or delegating to specific authorities the right to enforce such vigilance.

This was called repression.

Repression’s main function was to set the conditions for sublimation. Not all desires could be fulfilled. Not everything could be said or enacted. The capacity to limit oneself was the essence of one’s freedom and the freedom of all.

Partly thanks to new media forms and the post-repressive era it has unleashed, the unconscious can now roam free. Sublimation is no longer necessary.

Language has been dislocated. The content is in the form and the form is beyond, or in excess of, the content.

We are now led to believe that mediation is no longer necessary.

This explains the growing anti-humanist stance that now goes hand in hand with a general contempt for democracy. Calling this phase of our history fascist might be misleading unless by fascism we mean the normalisation of a social state of warfare.

Such a state would in itself be a paradox because, if anything, warfare leads to the dissolution of the social. And yet under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, politics will become a barely sublimated warfare. This will be a class warfare that denies its very nature — a war against the poor, a race war against minorities, a gender war against women, a religious war against Muslims, a war against the disabled.

Neoliberal capitalism has left in its wake a multitude of destroyed subjects, many of whom are deeply convinced that their immediate future will be one of continuous exposure to violence and existential threat.

They genuinely long for a return to some sense of certainty, the sacred, hierarchy, religion and tradition. They believe that nations have become akin to swamps that need to be drained and the world as it is should be brought to an end. For this to happen, everything should be cleansed off. They are convinced that they can only be saved in a violent struggle to restore their masculinity, the loss of which they attribute to the weaker among them, the weak they do not want to become.

In this context, the most successful political entrepreneurs will be those who convincingly speak to the losers, to the destroyed men and women of globalisation and to their ruined identities.

In the street fight politics will become, reason will not matter. Nor will facts. Politics will revert into brutal survivalism in an ultracompetitive environment.

Under such conditions, the future of progressive and future-oriented mass politics of the left is very uncertain.

In a world set on objectifying everybody and every living thing in the name of profit, the erasure of the political by capital is the real threat. The transformation of the political into

business raises the risk of the elimination of the very possibility of politics.

Whether civilisation can give rise at all to any form of political life is the problem of the 21st century.

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Richard Smith: Capitalism and the Destruction of Life on Earth: Six Theses on Saving the Humans

This article was originally published Nov 10, 2013 in Truthout.

As global capitalist economic growth accelerates planetary ecological collapse, this

article, originally published on November 10, 2013, argues that – impossible as it may seem at present – only the most radical solution – the overthrow of global capitalism, the construction of a mostly publicly-owned and mostly planned eco-socialist economy based on global "contraction and convergence," on substantial de-industrialization, on sharing, on much less work and much more play and on bottom-up democratic management – is, in fact, the only alternative to the collapse of civilization and ecological suicide.

When, on May 10, 2013, scientists at Mauna Loa Observatory on the big island of Hawaii announced that global CO2 emissions had crossed a threshold at 400 parts per million for the first time in millions of years, a sense of dread spread around the world – not only among climate scientists.

CO2 emissions have been relentlessly climbing since Charles David Keeling first set up his tracking station near the summit of Mauna Loa Observatory in 1958 to monitor average daily global CO2 levels. At that time, CO2 concentrations registered 315ppm. CO2 emissions and atmospheric concentrations have been climbing ever since and, as the records show, temperatures rises will follow. For all the climate summits, the promises of "voluntary restraint," the carbon trading and carbon taxes, the growth of CO2 emissions and atmospheric concentrations has not just been relentless, it has been accelerating in what scientists have dubbed the "Keeling Curve."

In the early 1960s, CO2ppm concentrations in the atmosphere grew by 0.7ppm per year. In recent decades, especially as China has industrialized, the growth rate has tripled to 2.1ppm per year. In just the first 17 weeks of 2013, CO2 levels jumped by 2.74ppm compared to last year — "the biggest increase since benchmark monitoring stations high on the Hawaiian volcano of Mauna Loa began taking measurements in 1958."[1] Carbon concentrations have not been this high since the Pliocene period, between 3 million and 5 million years ago, when global average temperatures were 3 degrees or 4 degrees Centigrade hotter than today, the Arctic was ice-free, sea levels were about 40 meters higher, jungles covered northern Canada and Florida was under water – along with coastal locations we now call New York City, London, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Sydney and many others.

Crossing this threshold has fueled fears that we are fast approaching "tipping points" – melting of the subarctic tundra or thawing and releasing the vast quantities of methane in the Arctic sea bottom – that will accelerate global warming beyond any human capacity to stop it: "I wish it weren't true, but it looks like the world is going to blow through the 400-ppm level without losing a beat," said Scripps Institute geochemist Ralph Keeling, whose father, Charles, set up the first monitoring stations in 1958: "At this pace, we'll hit 450 ppm within a few decades."

"It feels like the inevitable march toward disaster," said Maureen E. Raymo, a scientist at

the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, a unit of Columbia University.[2]

Why are we marching to disaster, "sleepwalking to extinction" as *The Guardian*'s George Monbiot once put it? Why can't we slam on the brakes before we ride off the cliff to collapse? I'm going to argue here that the problem is rooted in the requirements of capitalist reproduction, that large corporations are destroying life on Earth, that they can't help themselves, they can't change or change very much, that so long as we live under this system we have little choice but to go along in this destruction, to keep pouring on the gas instead of slamming on the brakes.

The only alternative – impossible as this may seem right now – is to overthrow this global economic system and all of the governments of the 1% that prop it up and replace them with a global economic democracy, a radical bottom-up political democracy, an ecosocialist civilization. I argue that, although we are fast approaching the precipice of ecological collapse, the means to derail this train wreck are in the making as, around the world, we are witnessing a near-simultaneous global mass democratic "awakening," as the Brazilians call it, almost a global uprising from Tahir Square to Zuccotti Park, from Athens to Istanbul to Beijing and beyond such as the world has never seen.

To be sure, like Occupy Wall Street, these movements are still inchoate, still mainly protesting what's wrong rather than fighting for an alternative social order. Like Occupy, they have yet to clearly and robustly answer that crucial question, "Don't like capitalism? What's your alternative?" Yet they are working on it, and they are for the most part instinctively and radically democratic. And in this lies our hope. I'm going to make my case in the form of six theses:

1. CAPITALISM IS, OVERWHELMINGLY, THE MAIN DRIVER OF PLANETARY ECOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

From climate change to resource overconsumption to pollution, the engine that has powered three centuries of accelerating economic development revolutionizing technology, science, culture and human life itself is today a roaring, out-of-control locomotive mowing down continents of forests, sweeping oceans of life, clawing out mountains of minerals, drilling, pumping out lakes of fuels, devouring the planet's last accessible resources to turn them all into "product" while destroying fragile global ecologies built up over eons.

Between 1950 and 2000 the global human population more than doubled from 2.5 billion to 6 billion. But in these same decades, consumption of major natural resources soared more than sixfold on average, some much more. Natural gas consumption grew nearly twelvefold, bauxite (aluminum ore) fifteenfold. And so on.[3]

At current rates, Harvard biologist E.O Wilson says, “half the world’s great forests have already been leveled, and half the world’s plant and animal species may be gone by the end of this century.” Corporations aren’t necessarily evil – although plenty are diabolically evil – but they can’t help themselves. They’re just doing what they’re supposed to do for the benefit of their shareholders. Shell Oil can’t help but loot Nigeria and the Arctic and cook the climate. That’s what shareholders demand.[4] BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and other mining giants can’t resist mining Australia’s abundant coal and exporting it to China and India. Mining accounts for 19 percent of Australia’s gross domestic product and substantial employment even as coal combustion is the worst driver of global warming. IKEA can’t help but level the forests of Siberia and Malaysia to feed the Chinese mills building its flimsy, disposable furniture (IKEA is the third-largest consumer of lumber in the world). Apple can’t help it if the cost of extracting the “rare earths” it needs to make millions of new iThings each year is the destruction of the eastern Congo – violence, rape, slavery, forced induction of child soldiers, along with poisoning local waterways. [5] Monsanto and DuPont and Syngenta and Bayer Crop Science have no choice but to wipe out bees, butterflies, birds and small farmers and extinguish crop diversity to secure their grip on the world’s food supply while drenching the planet with their Roundups and Atrazines and neonicotinoids. [6] This is how giant corporations are wiping out life on Earth in the course of a routine business day. And the bigger the corporations grow, the worse the problems become.

In Adam Smith’s day, when the first factories and mills produced hat pins and iron tools and rolls of cloth by the thousands, capitalist freedom to make whatever they wanted didn’t much matter because they didn’t have much impact on the global environment. But now everything is produced in the millions and billions – then trashed today and reproduced all over again tomorrow. When the planet is looted and polluted to support all this frantic and senseless growth, it matters – a lot.

The world’s climate scientists tell us we’re facing a planetary emergency. They’ve been telling us since the 1990s that if we don’t cut global fossil-fuel greenhouse-gas emissions by 80 percent to 90 percent below 1990 levels by 2050 we will cross critical tipping points and global warming will accelerate beyond any human power to contain it. Yet despite all the ringing alarm bells, no corporation and no government can oppose growth. Instead, every capitalist government in the world is putting pedal to the metal to accelerate growth, to drive us full throttle off the cliff to collapse. Marxists have never had a better argument against capitalism than this inescapable and apocalyptic “contradiction.”

2. SOLUTIONS TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS ARE BLINDINGLY OBVIOUS, BUT WE CAN’T TAKE THE NECESSARY STEPS TO PREVENT ECOLOGICAL COLLAPSE BECAUSE, SO LONG AS WE LIVE UNDER CAPITALISM, ECONOMIC GROWTH HAS TO TAKE PRIORITY OVER ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS OR THE ECONOMY WILL COLLAPSE AND MASS UNEMPLOYMENT WILL BE THE RESULT

We all know what we have to do: suppress greenhouse gas emissions. Stop overconsuming natural resources. Stop the senseless pollution of the Earth, its waters and its atmosphere with toxic chemicals. Stop producing waste that can't be recycled by nature. Stop the destruction of biological diversity and ensure the rights of other species to flourish. We don't need any new technological breakthroughs to solve these problems. Mostly, we just stop doing what we're doing. But we can't stop because we're all locked into an economic system in which companies have to grow to compete and reward their shareholders and because we all need the jobs.

Take Climate Change …

James Hansen, the world's pre-eminent climate scientist, has argued that to save the humans, "Coal emissions must be phased out as rapidly as possible, or global climate disasters will be a dead certainty. … Yes, [coal, oil, gas] most of the fossil fuels must be left in the ground. That is the explicit message that the science provides."

Humanity treads today on a slippery slope. As we continue to pump greenhouse gases in the air, we move onto a steeper, even more slippery incline. We seem oblivious to the danger – unaware of how close we may be to a situation in which a catastrophic slip becomes practically unavoidable, a slip where we suddenly lose all control and are pulled into a torrential stream that hurls us over a precipice to our demise. [7]

But how can we do this under capitalism? After his climate negotiators stonewalled calls for binding limits on CO2 emissions at Copenhagen, Cancun, Cape Town and Doha, President Obama is now trying to salvage his environmental "legacy" by ordering his EPA to impose "tough" new emissions limits on existing power plants, especially coal-fired plants.[8] But this won't salvage his legacy or, more importantly, his daughters' future. How much difference would it make, really, if every coal-fired power plant in the United States were to shut down tomorrow when US coal producers are free to export their coal to China, which they are doing, and when China is building another coal-fired power plant every week? The

atmosphere doesn't care where the coal is burned. It only cares how much is burned. Yet how could Obama tell American mining companies to stop mining coal? This would be tantamount to socialism. But if we do not stop mining and burning coal, capitalist freedom and private property is the least we'll have to worry about.

Same with Obama's "tough" new fuel-economy standards. In August 2012, Obama boasted that his new corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards would "double fuel efficiency" in the next 13 years to 54.5 mpg by 2025, up from 28.6 mpg at present – cutting vehicle CO2 emissions in half, so helping enormously to "save the planet." But as the Center for Biological Diversity and other critics have noted, Obama was lying as usual. First, his so-called "tough" new CAFE standards were so full of loopholes, negotiated with Detroit, that they actually encourage more gas guzzling, not less.[9] That's because the standards are based on a sliding scale according to "vehicle footprints" – the bigger the car, the less mileage it has to get to meet its standard. So, in fact, Obama's "tough" standards are (surprise) custom-designed to promote what Detroit does best – produce giant Sequoias, mountainous Denalis, Sierras, Yukons, Tundras and Ticonderogas, Ram Chargers and Ford F series luxury trucks, grossly obese Cadillac Escalades, soccer kid hauler Suburbans, even 8,000-pound Ford Excursions and let these gross gas hogs meet the "fleet standard." Many of these ridiculously oversized and overaccessorized behemoths are more than twice the weight of cars and pickup trucks in the 1950s.[10] These cars and "light" trucks are among the biggest-selling vehicles in America today (GM's Sierra is No. 1), and they get worse gas mileage than American cars and trucks half a century ago. Cadillac's current Escalade gets worse mileage than its chrome-bedecked tailfin-festooned land yachts of the mid-1950s![11] Little wonder Detroit applauded Obama's new CAFE standards instead of damning them. Secondly, what would it matter even if Obama's new CAFE standards actually did double fleet mileage – when American and global vehicle fleets are growing exponentially? In 1950 Americans had one car for every three people. Today we have 1.2 cars for every American. In 1950 when there were about 2.6 billion humans on the planet, there were 53 million cars on the world's roads – about one for every 50 persons. Today, there are 7 billion people but more than 1 billion cars. And industry forecasters expect there will be 2 billion to 2.5 billion cars on the world's roads by midcentury. China is expected to have 1 billion.[12] So, at the end of the day, incremental half-measures like CAFE standards can't stop rising GHG missions. Barring some technical miracle, the only way to cut vehicle emissions is to just stop making them – drastically suppress vehicle production, especially of the worst gas hogs. In theory, Obama could at least simply order GM to stop building its humongous gas guzzlers and switch to producing small economy cars. After all, the federal government owns the company! But of course, how could he do any such thing? Detroit lives by the mantra "big car big profit, small car small profit." Since Detroit has never been able to compete against the Japanese and Germans in the small-car market, which already is glutted and nearly profitless everywhere, such an order would only doom GM to failure, if not bankruptcy (again), throw masses of workers onto the unemployment lines (and devalue

the GM stock in the feds' portfolio). So given capitalism, Obama is, in fact, powerless. He's locked in to promoting the endless growth of vehicle production, even of the worst polluters – and lying about it all to the public to try to patch up his pathetic "legacy." And yet, if we don't suppress vehicle production, how can we stop rising CO2 emissions?

In the wake of the failure of climate negotiators from Kyoto to Doha to agree on binding limits on GHG emissions, exasperated British climate scientists Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows at the Tyndall Centre, Britain's leading climate change research center, wrote in September 2012 that we need an entirely "new paradigm": government policies must "radically change" if "dangerous" climate change is to be avoided:

We urgently need to acknowledge that the development needs of many countries leave the rich western nations with little choice but to immediately and severely curb their greenhouse gas emissions. … [The] misguided belief that commitments to avoid warming of 2 degrees C can still be realized with incremental adjustments to economic incentives. A carbon tax here, a little emissions trading there and the odd voluntary agreement thrown in for good measure will not be sufficient. … Long-term end-point targets (for example, 80% by 2050) have no scientific basis. What governs future global temperatures and other adverse climate impacts are the emissions from yesterday, today, and those released in the next few years.[13]

And not just scientists. In its latest world energy forecast released on November 12, 2012, the International Energy Agency (IEA) warns that despite the bonanza of fossil fuels now made possible by fracking, horizontal and deepwater drilling, we can't consume them if we want to save the humans: "The climate goal of limiting global warming to 2 degrees Centigrade is becoming more difficult and costly with each year that passes. … No more

that one-third of proven reserves of fossil fuels can be consumed prior to 2050 if the world is to achieve the 2 degree C goal. … " [14] Of course the science could be wrong about this. But so far climate scientists have consistently underestimated the speed and ferocity of global warming, and even prominent climate change deniers have folded their cards.[15]

Emergency Contraction or Global Ecological Collapse

Still, it's one thing for James Hansen or Bill McKibben of 350.org to say we need to "leave the coal in the hole, the oil in the soil, the gas under the grass," to call for "severe curbs" in GHG emissions – in the abstract. But think about what this means in our capitalist economy. Most of us, even passionate environmental activists, don't really want to face up to the economic implications of the science we defend. That's why, if you listen to environmentalists such as Bill McKibben or Al Gore, for example, you will get the impression that global warming is mainly driven by fossil-fuel-powered electric power plants, so if we just "switch to renewables" this will solve the main problem and we can carry on with life more or less as we do now. Indeed, "green capitalism" enthusiasts like Thomas Friedman and the union-backed "green jobs" lobby look to renewable energy, electric cars and such as "the next great engine of industrial growth" – the perfect win-win solution. This is a not a solution. This is a delusion, because greenhouse gasses are produced across the economy, not just by or even mainly by power plants. Globally, fossil-fuel-powered electricity generation accounts for 17 percent of GHG emissions, heating accounts for 5 percent, miscellaneous "other" fuel combustion 8.6 percent, industry 14.7 percent, industrial processes another 4.3 percent, transportation 14.3 percent, agriculture 13.6 percent, land-use changes (mainly deforestation) 12.2 percent.[16] This means, for a start, that even if we immediately replaced every fossil-fuel-powered electricity-generating plant on the planet with 100 percent renewable solar, wind and water power, this would reduce global GHG emissions only by around 17 percent. What this means is that, far from launching a new green-energy-powered "industrial growth" boom, barring some tech-fix miracle, the only way to impose "immediate and severe curbs" on fossil fuel production and consumption would be to impose an emergency contraction in the industrialized countries: drastically retrench and in some cases shut down industries, even entire sectors, across the economy and around the planet – not just fossil-fuel producers, but all the industries that consume them and produce GHG emissions – autos, trucking, aircraft, airlines, shipping and cruise lines, construction, chemicals, plastics, synthetic fabrics, cosmetics, synthetic fiber and fabrics, synthetic fertilizer and agribusiness CAFO operations, and many more. Of course, no one wants to hear this because, given capitalism, this would unavoidably mean mass bankruptcies, global economic collapse, depression and mass unemployment around the world. That's why in April 2013, in laying the political groundwork for his approval of the XL pipeline in some form, President Obama said "The politics of this are tough." The Earth's temperature probably isn't the "number one concern" for workers who haven't seen a raise in a decade, have an underwater mortgage, are spending $40 to fill their gas tank,

can't afford a hybrid car and face other challenges."[17] Obama wants to save the planet. But given capitalism, his "number one concern" has to be growing the economy, growing jobs. Given capitalism, today, tomorrow, next year and every year, economic growth will always be the overriding priority – until we barrel right off the cliff to collapse.

The Necessity of Denial and Delusion

There's no technical solution to this problem and no market solution either. In a very few cases – electricity generation is the main one – a broad shift to renewables could indeed sharply reduce fossil-fuel emissions in that sector. But if we just use "clean" "green" energy to power more growth, consume ever more natural resources to produce more and more junk we don't need, then we would solve nothing and still would be headed to collapse. Agriculture is another sector in which reliance on fossil fuels could be sharply reduced – by abandoning synthetic fertilizers and pesticides and switching to organic farming. And there's no downside there – just the resistance of the agribusiness industrial complex. But for the rest of the economy – mining, manufacturing, transportation, chemicals, most services (including construction, tourism, advertising, etc.), there are no such easy substitutes. Take transportation. There are no solar-powered ships or airplanes or trains on anyone's drawing boards. Producing millions of electric cars instead of millions of gasoline-powered cars, as I explained elsewhere, would be just as ecologically destructive and polluting, if in somewhat different ways, even if they were all run on solar power.[18] Substituting biofuels for fossil fuels in transportation just creates different but no less environmentally destructive problems: Converting farmland to raise biofuel feedstock pits food production against fuels. Converting rainforests, peatlands, savannas or grasslands to produce biofuels releases more CO2 into the atmosphere than the fossil fuels they replace and accelerates species extinction.[19] More industrial farming means more demand for water, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. And so on. Cap-and-trade schemes can't cut fossil fuel emissions because, as I explained elsewhere,[20] business understands, even if some environmentalists do not, that "dematerialization" is a fantasy, that there's no win-win tech solution, that capping emissions means cutting growth. Since cutting growth is unacceptable to business, labor and governments, cap-and-trade has been abandoned everywhere.[21] Carbon taxes can't stop global warming either because they do not cap emissions. That's why fossil fuel execs like Rex Tillerson, CEO of ExxonMobil (the largest private oil company in the world) and Paul Anderson, CEO of Duke Energy (the largest electric utility in the United States), support carbon taxes. They understand that carbon taxes would add something to the cost of doing business, like other taxes, but they pose no limit, no "cap" on growth.[22] Exxon predicts that, carbon tax or no carbon tax, by 2040 global demand for energy is going to grow by 35 percent to 65 percent in the developing world and nearly all of this is going to be supplied by fossil fuels. ExxonMobil is not looking to "leave the oil in the soil" as a favor to Bill McKibben and the humans. ExxonMobil is looking to pump it and burn it all as fast as possible to enrich its shareholders. [23]

James Hansen, Bill McKibben, Barack Obama and most of us, really, don't want to face up to the economic implications of the need to put the brakes on growth and fossil-fuel-based overconsumption. We all "need" to live in denial and believe in delusions that carbon taxes or some tech fix will save us because we all know that capitalism has to grow or we'll all be out of work. And the thought of replacing capitalism seems so impossible, especially given the powers arrayed against change. But what's the alternative? In the not-so-distant future, this is all going to come to a screeching halt one way or another – either we seize hold of this out-of-control locomotive and wrench down this overproduction of fossil fuels, or we ride this train right off the cliff to collapse.

Same with Resource Depletion

We in the industrialized "consumer economies" are not just overconsuming fossil fuels. We're overconsuming everything. From fish to forests, minerals to metals, oil to fresh water, we're consuming the planet like there's no tomorrow.[24] Ecological "footprint" scientists tell us that we in the industrialized nations are now consuming resources and sinks at the rate of 1.5 planets per year. That is, we're using natural resources like fish, forests, water, farmland and so on at half-again the rate that nature can replenish them.[25] According to the World Bank, the wealthiest 10 percent of the world's people accounts for almost 60 percent of consumption expenditures and the top 20 percent accounts for more than 76 percent of global consumption, whereas the bottom 40 percent of the world's population account for just 5 percent. Even the bottom 70 percent of the world's population accounts for barely 15.3 percent of global consumption expenditures.[26] Needless to say, the 70 percent wants and deserves a higher material standard of living. Yet if the whole world were to achieve this by consuming like Americans, we would need something like five more planets of natural resources and sinks for all of that.[27] Think what this means.

Take the case of China. Columbia University's Earth Policy Institute predicts that if China keeps growing by around 8 percent per year, it's current rate, Chinese average per capita consumption will reach current US level by around 2035. But to provide the natural resources for China's 1.3 billion-plus to consume like America's 330 million, the Chinese, roughly 20 percent of the world's population, will consume as much oil as the entire world consumes today. They also will consume 69 percent of current world grain production, 62 percent of the current world meat production, 63 percent of current world coal consumption, 35 percent of current world steel consumption, 84 percent of current world paper consumption. (See Table 1.) Well, where on earth are the Chinese going to find the resources (not to mention sinks) to support all this consumption? China certainly doesn't have the resources. That's why the Chinese are buying up the planet. And that's just China. What about the other four-fifths of humanity? What are they going to consume in 2035?

Already, as resource analyst Michael Klare reviews in his latest book, *The Race for What's Left*, around the world existing reserves of oil, minerals and other resources "are being depleted at a terrifying pace and will be largely exhausted in the not-too-distant future." This is driving miners and drillers to the ends of the earth, the bottom of oceans, to the arctic. We're running out of planet to plunder so fast that serious people like Google's Larry Page and Eric Schmidt have partnered with film director James Cameron to make life imitate art, to explore the possibility of mining asteroids and near planets. *Avatar* – the perfect capitalist solution to resource exhaustion (but the Marines will be Chinese). [28]

China's Capitalist Environmental Nightmare

As Beijing has been choking on smog this year, Deutsche Bank analysts gloomily conclude that, barring extreme reforms, Chinese coal consumption and increased car ownership will push pollution levels 70 percent higher by 2025. They say that even if China's economy slowed to 5 percent growth per year, its annual coal consumption still would rise to 6 billion tons by 2022, from the current 3.8 billion tons. Car ownership is expected to increase over the years to 400 million in 2030 from the current 90 million. For China to meet its goal of reducing PM2.5 particulate matter to 35 micrograms of per cubic meter by 2030, the government would have to take drastic steps – shut down large numbers of coal-fired power plants, sharply reduce the number of vehicles on the roads, and shut down many other polluting industries.

Even then, air pollution would still be above the level deemed safe by the World Health Organization (25 micrograms of PM2.5 particulates per cubic meter). The current national average is 75 micrograms per cubic meter. In January, PM2.5 levels in Beijing reached 900 micrograms per cubic meter.[29] But here again, the problem is that ever since China turned onto the "capitalist road" and made its economy and employment ever-more dependent upon market success like the Western capitalist economies Deng Xiaoping sought to emulate, it can no more subordinate growth to the environment than can Barack Obama or ExxonMobil. Instead, China's commie capitalists, like regular capitalists everywhere, have no choice but to put the pedal to the metal, do all they can to accelerate humanity's collective drive to suicide.[30]

"Wild facts" and Unquestioned Assumptions

In mainstream discourse it is taken as an absolutely unquestioned given by scientists like James Hansen, environmentalists like George Monbiot, not to mention CEOs and presidents, that demand for everything must grow infinitely, that economies must grow forever. That's why Hansen, Monbiot, James Lovelock and others tell us that, Fukishima notwithstanding, we "have to" go nuclear for energy production. In their view, the human population is

headed for 9 billion to 10 billion. All these billions want to consume like Americans, so we will need more power for their washing machines, air conditioners, iPads, TVs and (electric) SUVs. We can't burn more fossil fuels to produce this power because it will cook the planet. Renewables are great but can't reliably meet relentlessly growing "base load" demand for electricity 24/7. Therefore, they tell us, we have no choice but to turn to nuclear power. (Besides, what could go wrong with the "newest," "safest," "fourth generation" reactors? What indeed?)[31]

But not one of these people stops to ask the obvious question: Where are all the resources going to come from to support insatiable consumption on a global scale? In the capitalist lexicon, there is no concept of "too much." The word *overconsumption* cannot be found in Econ. 101 text books except as a temporary market aberration, soon to be erased as "perfect competition" matches supply to demand and shortages and surpluses vanish down the gullet of the consumer. The fact that we live on one small planet with finite resources and sinks is just beyond the capitalist imagination because, as Herman Daly used to say, the "wild facts" of environmental reality demolish their underlying premise of the viability of endless growth on a finite planet. So inconvenient facts must be denied, suppressed or ignored. And they are. When, on May 10,2013, climate scientists announced the latest "wild fact" that the level of heat-trapping CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere had passed the long-feared milestone of 400 ppm, an event fraught with ominous consequences for us all, this was met with total silence from the world's economic and political elites. President Obama was busy preparing his own announcement – that he was clearing the way for accelerated natural-gas exports by approving a huge new $10 billion Freeport LNG facility in Texas. Obama's Department of Energy gave Freeport LNG the green light because it "found the prospective benefits from exporting energy outweighed concerns about possible downsides." No surprise there. Freeport LNG chief Michael Smith wasn't anticipating downsides or any change in Obama's priorities. He said: "I hope this means that more facilities will get approval in due time, sooner than later. The country needs these exports for jobs, for trade and for geopolitical reasons. … "[32] That's why, even though, at some repressed level, most Americans understand that fracking the planet is disastrous, even suicidal for their own children in the long run, yet still for the present they have to make the mortgage payments and fill the gas tank. So they have little choice but to live in denial and support fracking.[33] And so we go, down the slippery slope.

No one stops to ask "what's it all for?" Why do we "need" all this energy? Why do we "need" all the stuff we produce with all this energy? It's high time we start asking this question. Economists tell us that two-thirds of America's own economy is geared to producing "consumer" goods and services. To be sure, we need food, clothing, housing, transportation, and energy to run all this. But as Vance Packard astutely observed half a century ago, most of what corporations produce today is produced not for the needs of people but for the needs of corporations to sell to people. From the ever-more obscene and pointless vanities

of ruling class consumption – the Bentleys and Maseratis, the Bergdorf Goodman designer collections, the penthouses and resorts and estates and yachts and jets, to the endless waste stream of designed-in obsolescence-driven mass market fashions, cosmetics, furniture, cars, "consumer electronics," the obese 1000 calorie Big Macs with fries, the obese and overaccesorized SUVs and "light trucks," the obese and ever-growing McMansions for ever-smaller middle class families, the whole-house central air conditioning, flat screen TVs in every room, iThings in every hand, H&M disposable "fast fashion" too cheap to bother to clean, [34] the frivolous and astonishingly polluting jet and cruise ship vacations everywhere (even Nation magazine cruises with Naomi Klein!), and all the retail malls, office complexes, the packaging, shipping industries, the junk mail/magazine/catalog sales companies, the advertising, banking and credit card "industries" that keep this perpetual consumption machine humming along, not to mention the appalling waste of the arms industry, which is just total deliberate waste and destruction, the vast majority – I would guess at least three quarters of all the goods and services we produce today just do not need to be produced at all. It's all just a resource-hogging, polluting waste. My parents lived passably comfortable working class lives in the 1940s and 50s without half this stuff and they weren't living in caves. We could all live happier, better, more meaningful lives without all this junk — and we do not need ever-more energy, solar or otherwise, to produce it. We could shut down all the coal-powered electric generators around the world, most of which, especially in China, are currently dedicated to powering the production of superfluous and disposable junk we don't need and replace them with — nothing. How's that for a sustainable solution? Same with nuclear. Since the 1960s, Japan built 54 nuclear power plants. But these were built not so much to provide electricity for the Japanese (their population is falling) as to power Japan's mighty manufacturing export engine producing all those disposable TVs and Gameboys and Toyotas and Hondas the world does not need and can no longer afford to consume.

Endless growth or repair, rebuild, upgrade, recycle?

So, for example, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, we don't really need a global automobile industry. At least we don't need an industry cranking out hundreds of millions of new cars every year, because the industry is built on the principle of designed-in obsolescence, on insatiable repetitive consumption, on advertising and "cash for clunkers" programs to push you to crush your perfectly good present car for a "new," "improved," "bigger," "more luxurious" model that is, in reality, trivially different, sometimes even inferior to the one you just junked. What we need is a different approach to transportation. To build a sustainable transportation system, we would have to divert most resources from auto production to public transportation, trains, buses and bicycling. But, of course, bikes and public transport aren't feasible everywhere and for every task, particularly for those who live in the suburbs or the country or in the mostly rural developing world. So we would still need some cars and trucks – but many fewer if we "degrow" the economy to produce just what we need instead

of for profit. As the VW ads below point out, properly designed and engineered cars can be sturdy but simple, economical to drive, easily serviceable and repairable (even DIY), perpetually rebuildable and upgradable as needed. I'm not suggesting an ecosocialist society should produce this particular "peoples' car." We need something with modern safety features. But to the extent that we would need cars in a sustainable society, we could save immense resources and GHG emissions by producing massively fewer cars and keep them running for decades, if not practically forever. Reducing global car production to something like, say 10 percent of current production – and sharing those – would not only save vast resources and eliminate massive pollution but also free up labor and resources for other uses. Let us shorten the working day – and take longer vacations.

The same goes for all kinds of industries.

Apple easily could build you iPhones and iMacs, in classic timeless designs that could last for decades, that could be upgraded easily. This would save mountains of resources, not to mention the lives of Congolese kids and Foxconn assembly workers. But how much profit is there in that? Apple could never justify such a humane and environmentally rational approach to its shareholders because shareholders (who are several stages removed from the "sourcing" process and don't really care to know about it) are capitalists rationally looking to maximize returns on their portfolios, not to maximize the lifespan of the company's products, let alone the lifespan of Congolese or Chinese. So to this end, you have to be convinced that your G4 phone is not good enough, that you "need" an iPhone5 because you need a phone that streams movies, that talks to you and more, and next year you will need an iPhone6. And even if you own an iPad3 you will soon "need" an iPad4, plus an iPad Mini, and how will you live without iTV? This incessant, exponentially growing demand for the latest model of disposable electronic gadgets is destroying societies and the environment from Congo to China and beyond.

Miners near village of Kobu in northeastern Congo. Picture credit: Finbarr O'Reilly/Reuters, in The New York Times*, March 20, 2012.*

IKEA easily could manufacture beautifully designed, high-quality, sturdy and durable furniture that could last a lifetime, that could be handed down to your children or passed on friends or antique shops for others. That would save a Siberia's worth of trees, lakes of toxic dyes and finishes, and vast quantities of other resources. But why would it do that? IKEA is not in business to make furniture or save the planet. IKEA is in the business to make money. As Ingvar Kamprad, founder and CEO of IKEA (and Nazi symp), long ago discovered, the way to maximize profits (besides employing semi-slave forced prison labor in Stalinist regimes and moving his "Swedish" company from high-tax Sweden to low-tax Holland and Switzerland)[35] is to relentlessly cheapen production by, among other tactics, building flat-pack disposable particle-board furniture in accordance with the Iron Law of Marketing to

sell “the cheapest construction for the briefest interval the buying public will tolerate” so IKEA can chop down more Siberian birch trees and sell you the same shoddy $59 bookcase all over again that will last you as long as the first one did – perhaps a bit longer this time if you don’t actually load many books of those flimsy shelves. As an IKEA commercial, directed by Spike Jonze, tells us: “an old lamp (or bookcase or table) doesn’t have any feelings; any piece of furniture can and should be replaced at any time.” The ad, and the whole IKEA approach, suggests that objects have no lasting meaning or value. They’re disposable; when we tire of them, we should just throw them out.[36] This is how IKEA got to be the third-largest consumer of wood in the world, most of it from East Europe and the Russian Siberia, where, according to the World Bank, half of all logging is illegal even by the Russian kleptocracy’s standards of legality. IKEA’s wholly owned Swedish subsidiary Swedwood has even been condemned by Russian nature conservancy organizations and the Global Forest Coalition for clear-cutting 1,400 acres a year of 200- to 600-year-old forest near the Finnish border, a process that “is having deep ramifications on invaluable forest ecosystems.”[37] This is how IKEA’s business plan based on endless “repetitive consumption” is wiping out life on Earth. Here again, the capitalist freedom to make such junk wouldn’t matter – if it weren’t costing the Earth.[38]

Given capitalism, there’s no way to “incentivize” GM to stop producing new cars every year, IKEA to stop making its disposable furniture, Apple to stop pushing you to lose your iPhone 4 and buy a 5. That’s what they’re invested in. Companies can’t change, or change much, because it’s too costly, too risky, shareholders won’t allow it. And given capitalism, most workers, most of the time, have no choice but to support all this suicidal overconsumption because if we all stop shopping to save the planet today, we’d all be out of work tomorrow. Ask your nearest 6-year-old what’s wrong with this picture.

Capitalism and Délastage in the Richest Country of Poor People in the World

Yet even as corporations are plundering the planet to overproduce stuff we don’t need, huge social, economic and ecological needs – housing, schools, infrastructure, health care, environmental remediation – go unmet, even in the industrialized world, while most of Third World lacks even basic sanitation, clean water, schools, health care, ecological restoration, not to mention jobs.[39] After 300 years of capitalist “development” the gap between rich and poor has never been wider: Today, almost half the world, more than 3 billion people, live on less than $2.50 a day, 80 percent of humanity lives on less than $10 a day. This while the world’s richest 1% own 40 percent of the world’s wealth. The richest 10 percent own 85 percent of total global assets, and half the world barely owns 1 percent of global wealth. And these gaps have only widened over time.[40] Tell me again where Karl Marx was wrong? In Congo is one of the lushest, most fertile countries on the planet, with untold natural wealth in minerals, lumber, tropical crops and more. Yet its resources are plundered every day to support gross overconsumption in the north while poverty, hunger and

malnutrition are so widespread that Congo is now listed dead last on the 2011 Global Hunger Index, a measure of malnutrition and child nutrition compiled by the International Food Policy Research Institute. While European and American corporations loot its copper and cobalt and coltran for iPhones and such, half the population eats only once a day and a quarter less than that. Things have reached such a state that in places like the capital Kinshasha parents can afford to feed their children only every other day. Congolese call it "délastage" – an ironic takeoff on the rolling electrical blackouts that routinely hit first one neighborhood then the next. In this context it means "Today we eat! Tomorrow we don't."

"On some days," one citoyen told a *New York Times* reporter, "some children eat, others do not. On other days, all the children eat, and the adults do not. Or vice versa." [41] This, in the 21st century, in one of the resource-richest countries on Earth, and brought to them by an economic system that capitalist economists never tire of telling us is "the best system humanity can come up with."

Contraction or Collapse

If there's no market mechanism to stop plundering the planet, then, again, what alternative is there but to impose an emergency contraction on resource consumption? This doesn't mean we would have to de-industrialize and go back to riding horses and living in log cabins. But it does mean that we would have to abandon the "consumer economy" – shut down all kinds of unnecessary, wasteful and polluting industries from junk food to cruise ships, disposable Pampers to disposable H&M clothes, disposable IKEA furniture, endless new model cars, phones, electronic games, the lot. Plus all the banking, advertising, junk mail, most retail, etc. We would have completely redesign production to replace "fast junk food" with healthy, nutritious, fresh "slow food," replace "fast fashion" with "slow fashion," bring back mending, alterations and local tailors and shoe repairmen. We would have to completely redesign production of appliances, electronics, housewares, furniture and so on to be as durable and long-lived as possible. Bring back appliance repairmen and such. We would have to abolish the throwaway disposables industries, the packaging and plastic bag industrial complex, bring back refillable bottles and the like. We would have to design and build housing to last for centuries, to be as energy-efficient as possible, to be reconfigurable and shareable. We would have to vastly expand public transportation to curb vehicle use but also build those we do need to last and be shareable like Zipcar or Paris' municipally owned "Autolib" shared electric cars. These are the sorts of things we would have to do to if we really want to stop overconsumption and save the world. All these changes are simple, self-evident, no great technical challenge. They just require a completely different kind of economy, an economy geared to producing what we need while conserving resources for future generations of humans and for other species with which we share this planet.

3. IF CAPITALISM CAN'T HELP BUT DESTROY THE WORLD, THEN WHAT ALTERNATIVE

IS THERE BUT TO NATIONALIZE AND SOCIALIZE MOST OF THE ECONOMY AND PLAN IT DIRECTLY, EVEN PLAN MOST OF THE GLOBAL INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY?

With 7 billion humans crowded on one small planet running out of resources, with cities disappearing under vast clouds of pollution, with the glaciers and ice caps melting and species going extinct by the hour, we desperately need a PLAN to avert ecological collapse. We need a comprehensive global plan, a number of national or regional plans, and a multitude of local plans – and we need to coordinate them all. When climate scientists call on governments to cut CO2 emissions to stay within a global "carbon budget" if we want to keep a livable planet, isn't that, in effect, calling for "planning," indeed, planning on a global scale? When governments pump money into research projects like nuclear power or biotech or the Internet or clean energy projects, isn't that planning? When scientists say that we need to massively reduce and limit consumption of oil, coal, trees, fish, all kinds of scarce resources or stop dumping chemicals in the world's oceans – isn't that, in effect, physical planning and rationing? And don't we want that? Indeed, because we all breathe the same air, live in the same biosphere, don't we really want and need something like a "one-world government" at least on environmental issues? How else can we regulate humanity's collective impact on the global biosphere? How else can we reorganize and reprioritize the economy in the common interest and environmental rationality except in a mostly planned and mostly publicly owned economy?

What Would We Have To Do To Save the Humans?

If we want a sustainable economy, one that "meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs," then we would have to do at least some or all of the following:

1. Put the brakes on out-of-control growth in the global North – retrench or shut down unnecessary, resource-hogging, wasteful, polluting industries like fossil fuels, autos, aircraft and airlines, shipping, chemicals, bottled water, processed foods, unnecessary pharmaceuticals and so on. Abolish luxury-goods production, the fashions, jewelry, handbags, mansions, Bentleys, yachts, private jets etc.

Abolish the manufacture of disposable, throw-away and "repetitive consumption" products. All these consume resources we're running out of, resources that other people on the planet desperately need and that our children and theirs will need.

2. Discontinue harmful industrial processes like industrial agriculture, industrial fishing, logging, mining and so on.

3. Close many services – the banking industry, Wall Street, the credit card, retail, PR and advertising "industries" built to underwrite and promote all this overconsumption. I'm sure most of the people working in these so-called industries would rather be doing something else, something useful, creative and interesting and personally rewarding with their lives. They deserve that chance.

4. Abolish the military-surveillance-police state industrial

complex, and all its manufactures because this is just a total waste whose only purpose is global domination, terrorism and destruction abroad and repression at home. We can’t build decent societies anywhere when so much of social surplus is squandered on such waste.

5. Reorganize, restructure, reprioritize production and build the products we do need to be as durable and shareable as possible.

6. Steer investments into things society does need, like renewable energy, organic farming, public transportation, public water systems, ecological remediation, public health, quality schools and other currently unmet needs.

7. Deglobalize trade to produce what can be produced locally; trade what can’t be produced locally, to reduce transportation pollution and revive local producers.

8. Equalize development the world over by shifting resources out of useless and harmful production in the North and into developing the South, building basic infrastructure, sanitation systems, public schools, health care, and so on.

9. Devise a rational approach to eliminate or control waste and toxins as much as possible.

10. Provide equivalent jobs for workers displaced by the retrenchment or closure of unnecessary or harmful industries, not just the unemployment line, not just because workers cannot support the industry we and they need to save ourselves.

"Necessary," "Unnecessary" and Who's the "Decider"?

Now we might all agree that we have to cut "overconsumption" to save the humans. But

who's to say what's "necessary" and "unnecessary?" How do we decide what to cut? And who's to decide? Under capitalism goods and services are rationed by the market. But that's not sustainable because the market can't restrain consumption, the market can only accelerate consumption. So we need a non-market approach. I don't claim to have all the answers. This is a big question and I'm sure there are others better qualified than me to figure out solutions. But I would think the short answer has to be a combination of planning, rationing and democracy. I don't see why that's so hard. The US government planned significant parts of the US economy during World War II and rationed many goods and services. And we managed just fine. Actually, far form suffering unduly, Americans took pride in conservation and sharing. Besides, what's the alternative? What other choice do we have? There are only so many ways to organize a modern industrial economy.

The challenges of physically planning the world economy in the interests of the 99% instead of for the 1% – reorganizing and reprioritizing the world economy to provide every person sufficient, nutritious, safe and delicious food, providing every human with high-quality, pleasurable, and aesthetically appealing housing, consolidating our cities to maximize the feasibility of public transportation, building great schools to enable every student to reach her or his fullest potential, providing top-notch health care for everyone on the planet, reorganizing and reprioritizing work so that everyone can find constructive, enjoyable, interesting, challenging and rewarding work, work that's rewarding in many ways beyond simple remuneration, providing fun, enlightening and inspiring entertainment, reducing the workday so people can actually have time to enjoy themselves and pursue other pleasures, while, not least, how to limit our collective human impact on the planet so as to leave space and resources to all the other wonderful life forms with which we have the pleasure of sharing this unique and amazing planet – all these are no doubt big challenges. They're very big political challenges. But they're not an economic challenge. This is not Soviet Russia in 1917. I'm not proposing Maoist austerity. Today, there's more than enough wealth and productive capacity to provide every person on earth a very satisfactory material standard of living. Even more than half a century ago, Gandhi was right to say then that "there's more than enough wealth for man's need but never enough for some men's greed." I doubt that it would even be much of a technical challenge. Google's Larry Page predicts that the virtually everyone in the world will have access to the Internet by 2020. Quantifying human needs, global resources and global agricultural and industrial capacities is, I would think, a fairly pedestrian task for today's computers, with all their algorithms.

Planning Can't Work?

Right-wing economists like Milton Friedman denied the very possibility of planning any economy, equating all planning with Stalinism. I don't buy that. The question is this: Planning by whom, for whom? Stalinist central planning was planning from the top down, by and for a totalitarian bureaucracy. It completely shut out workers and the rest of society

from the planning process. So it's hardly surprising that planning didn't work so well in the Soviet Union. But I don't see what that tells us about the potentials of planning from the bottom up, of democratic planning. Besides, capitalists indirectly plan the national and global economies all the time. They meet every year at Davos to shape the world market for their benefit. They conspire to privatize medicine, schools, public transportation, force us to buy "their" water or eat GMO foods. They use the IMF and World Bank to shackle countries with debt then open them up to U.S. corporate takeover. They've been using their states for centuries to expropriate peasants and tribes, even to exterminate them when necessary as in the Americas, to steal and privatize common lands, break up pre-capitalist societies, reorganize, replan whole continents to set up the right "business climate" for capital accumulation. Late developers like Japan and South Korea used their state-backed MITIs and Chaebols to hothouse their own industries, protect them and strategically plan their integration into the world market. Capitalists are very good at planning – for their own interests. So why can't we plan the economy for our own interests?

Government "Can't Pick Winners"?

Disengenuous capitalist apologists like the *Wall Street Journal* are quick to condemn any perceived government funded "failures" like the recent bankruptcy of solar startup Solyndra Corporation bankrolled by the Obama administration as proof that "government can't pick winners." But Solyndra didn't fail because solar is a losing technology. It failed because, ironically, capitalist Solyndra could not compete against lower-cost, state-owned, state-directed and state-subsidized competitors in China. Besides, since when do capitalists have a crystal ball? CEOs and corporate boards bet on "loser" technologies and products all the time. Look at the recent collapse of electric car startup Fisker Automotive, or Better Place, the Israeli electric vehicle charging/battery swapping stations venture.[42] These join a long list of misplaced private bets from Sony's Betamax to Polaroid, Ford's Edsel, Tucker Autonobilie, DeLorean Motor Company and all the way back to White Star Lines Titanic and the Tulip Mania. CEOs and boards not only pick losing technology and products, they also lose money for their shareholders and even drive perfectly successful companies into bankruptcy every day: Jamie Dimon at JPMorgan, Lehman Brothers, Washington Mutual, Enron, WorldCom, Pan Am, SwissAir and on and on. Who knows if Facebook or Zipcar or Tesla Motors will ever make money? Government-backed Solyndra lost $500 million. But when Jamie Dimon lost $12 billion for JPMorgan, I don't recall the *Journal* howling that capitalists "can't pick winners." When Enron collapsed I don't recall hearing any blanket condemnation of the "inevitable incompetence" of the private sector. Hypocrisy is stock and trade of capitalists, lazy media and fact-averse capitalist economists who want to make the facts fit their simple-minded model no matter the truth. That's why it's entirely in character that the *Wall Street Journal* has never bothered to applaud government when it picked indisputable winners: when government-funded, government-directed applied research produced nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, radar, rockets, the jet engine, the transistor,

the microchip, the Internet, GPS, crucial breakthroughs in biotechnology, when government scientists and government industries launched the Apollo spacecrafts that put men on the moon, when government-developed and produced ballistic missiles terrorized the Soviets and government-designed and operated bombers bombed the Reds in Korea and Vietnam to "contain Communism" and secure American dominance of the Free World for corporate subscribers of the Wall Street Journal to exploit – where then was the *cri de coeur* that "government can't pick winners"? And what about those government-run drones? Anti-government bigmouth Rand Paul filibustered for a whole day against the threat of swarms of government drones over American cities but I didn't hear him complain that government drones don't work. That wasn't his problem. And when, after an eight-year, mind-bogglingly difficult, complex and risky 150 million-mile journey, NASA's government-built Curiosity spaceship landed a (government-built) state-of-the art science lab the size of a Mini Cooper within a mile and a half of its target on the surface of Mars – then it immediately set off to explore its new neighborhood – even the Ayn Rand-loving government-hating Republicans in Congress were awed into silence. As David Sirota's headline in Salon.com read on August 13, 2012, just after Curiosity set down on the red planet: "Lesson from Mars: Government works!" And right now, as I'm writing this in April 2013, most of a year later, that government-run Mars explorer is happily roving around drilling core samples to find out if there is now, or used to be, water and possibly even life on Mars. All this while, back home, Shell Oil's private capitalist-run arctic drilling platform ran aground in an arctic storm and is now being towed away to Asia for repairs while Shell Oil's shareholders are having second thoughts about their CEO's wisdom in "picking winners" by squandering $5 billion on this fools errand of drilling for oil under Artic ice.[43]

One Planet, One People, One Economy for the Common Good

For better or worse we are well into what scientists call the "Anthropocene." Nature doesn't run Earth anymore. We do. So if we are, after all, just "one people on one planet," it's time we begin to make conscious and collective decisions about how our economic activity affects the natural world – and I don't mean "geoengineering" the planet by wrapping glaciers in tinfoil to slow their melting while capitalism goes right on cooking and pillaging the planet. Since the rise of capitalism 300 years ago, more and more of the world has come to be run on the principle of market anarchy, on Adam Smith's maxim that every individual should just maximize his own interest – "look out for No. 1" – and the "public interest," the "common good" would take care of itself. Well, that hasn't worked out so well. It was always a dumb theory, but it's worked OK for the 1% who could mostly manage without the commons. For the rest of us, the more capitalism, the more the common good gets trashed. And now globalized market anarchy is destroying not just humanity and society but even life on Earth.[44] The problem with Smith's theory is that the aggregate of private interests don't add up to the public interest. The problems we face with respect to the planetary environment and ecology can't be solved by individual choice in the marketplace. They

require collective democratic control over the economy to prioritize the needs of society, the environment, other species and future generations. This requires local, national and global economic planning to reorganize the world economy and redeploy labor and resources to these ends. And it requires an economy of guaranteed full employment because if we would have to shut down ExxonMobil and GM and Monsanto[45] and Walmart and so on to save the world, then we have to provide equal or better jobs for all those laid-off workers because otherwise they won't support what we all need to do to save ourselves.

Ecosocialism and the Salvation of Small Businesses

This does not at all mean that we would have to nationalize local restaurants, family farms, farmers markets, artisans, groceries, bakeries, repair shops, workers co-ops and the like. Small-scale self-managed producers based on simple reproduction are not destroying the world. Large-scale capitalist investor-owned corporations based on insatiable accumulation are destroying the world. So they would have to be nationalized, many closed down, others scaled back, others repurposed. But an ecosocialist society would rescue and promote small-scale, local, self-managed businesses because we would need them. Indeed, we would want many more of them whereas, today, capitalism is driving them out of business everywhere.

4. RATIONAL PLANNING REQUIRES DEMOCRACY: VOTING THE BIG QUESTIONS

Solar or coal? Frack the planet, or work our way off fossil fuels? Drench the world's farms in toxic pesticides or return to organic agriculture. Public transportation or private cars as the mainstay? Let's put the big questions up for a vote. Shouldn't everyone have a say in decisions that affect them all? Isn't that the essential idea of democracy? The problem with capitalism is that the economy isn't up for a vote. But it needs to be. Again, in Adam Smith's day it mattered less, at least for the environment, because private decisions had so little impact on the planet. But today, huge decisions that affect all of us, other species, and even the fate of life on Earth are all still private decisions, made by corporate boards on behalf of self-interested investors. Polls show that 57 percent of Chinese feel that protecting the environment should be given priority, even at the expense of economic growth, and only 21 percent prioritize the economy over the environment.[46] But, obviously, the Chinese don't get to vote on that or anything else. Polls show Americans opposed to GMO foods outnumber supporters nearly two to one and 82 percent of Americans favor labeling of GMO foods.[47] But Americans don't get to vote on whether we get GMOs in our food or get told about it. Well, why not? Corporate boards vote to put GMOs and all kinds of toxic chemicals in our food. We're the ones who consume this stuff. We can't avoid GMOs simply by refusing to purchase them – the "market solution" – because they're everywhere. They're in 80 percent of the foods we consume, and Monsanto and the rest of the GMO-industrial complex bribe politicians and regulators with campaign contributions and lucrative revolving-door jobs to make sure you don't know what foods to avoid.[48] Well, why should we accept this?

Why shouldn't we have a say in these decisions? We don't have to be experts; corporate boards aren't composed of experts. They're mainly made up of major investors. They discuss and vote on what they want to do, then hire experts to figure out how to implement their decisions. Why can't we do that – for humanity's interests?

Every Cook Can Govern

From Tunisa to Tahir Square; Zuccotti Park to Gezi Park; Madison, Wisconsin, to Kunming Yunnan, Songjian Shanghai, Shifang Sichuan, Guangzhou and thousands of sites and cities and towns all over China, ordinary citizens demonstrate remarkably rational environmental sense against the profit-driven environmental irrationality and irresponsibility of their rulers.[49] In Turkey, "Sultan" Erdogon's decree to tear up Istanbul's last major park to replace it with an Ottoman-style shopping mall provoked mass outrage. Protesters complained, as one put it: "When were we asked what we wanted? We have three times as many mosques as we do schools. Yet they are building new mosques. There are eight shopping malls in the vicinity of Taksim, yet they want to build another. … Where are the opera houses? The theaters? The culture and youth centers? What about those? They only choose what will bring them the most profit without considering what we need."[50] When, in a bid to mollify the protesters, a spokesman for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) floated the excellent idea of a public referendum on the issue saying, "We might put it to a referendum. … In democracies only the will of the people counts," Erdogon considered this option for a moment. But when protesters doubted his sincerity, he proved them right by calling in his riot squads to crush the protests instead.[51] In Brazil, on the heels of the Turkish protests, mass protests erupted over announced bus fare hikes but soon morphed into more sweeping social protest as hundreds of thousands of Brazilians turned out in cities across the country to denounce the irresponsible waste of public funds on extravagant soccer stadiums in the run-up to the World Cup in 2014, when schools, public transportation, hospitals, health care and other public services are neglected: "People are going hungry, and the government builds stadiums," said Eleuntina Scuilgaro, a pensioner. "I love soccer, but we need schools," said Evaldir Cardoso, a firemen at a protest with his 7-month-old son. "These protests are in favor of common sense, argued protester Roberta da Matta. "We pay an absurd amount of taxes in Brazil, and now more people are questioning what they are getting in return."[52]

If corporations and capitalist governments can't align production with the common good and ecological rationality, what other choice is there but for society to collectively and democratically organize, plan and manage most production themselves? To do this we would have to establish democratic institutions to plan and manage our social economy. We would have to set up planning boards at local, regional, national/continental and international levels. Those would have to include not just workers, the direct producers, but entire communities, consumers, farmers, peasants, everyone. We have models: the Paris

Commune, Russian soviets, Brazil's participatory planning, La Via Campesina and others. Direct democracy at the base, delegated authority with right of recall for higher-level planning boards. What's so difficult about that? [53]

As Greg Palast, Jarrold Oppenheim and Theo MacGregor described in *Democracy and Regulation: How the Public Can Govern Essential Services* (2003), it is a curious and ironic fact that the United States, foremost protagonist of the free market, possesses a large and indispensable sector of the economy that is not governed by the free market but instead, democratically, by public oversight – and that is utilities: the provision of electricity, heating fuel, water and sewerage, and local telephone service. Not only that but these are the most efficient and cheapest utility systems in the world. The authors note that British residents pay 44 percent more for electricity than do American consumers, 85 percent more for local telephone service and 26 percent more for natural gas. Europeans pay even more, Latin Americans more than Europeans. They write that "Americans pay astonishingly little for high-quality public services, yet low charges do not suppress wages: American utility workers are the nation's industrial elite, with a higher concentration of union membership than in any other private industry." Palast, Oppenheim and MacGregor attribute this to the fact that, unlike Britain and most of the rest of the world, utilities are not unregulated free-market corporations like ExxonMobil or Monsanto or Rio Light or British Water. Instead, they are tightly regulated industries, mostly privately owned, but many publicly owned by local municipalities. Yet even when utilities are privately owned like Con Edison in New York or Green Mountain Power in Vermont or Florida Power and Light (to take some East Coast examples), it's really hard to call this "capitalism." It's more like state capitalism, even quasi-socialism. Either way, public- or investor-owned, they are highly regulated, subject to public oversight, involvement and control:

Unique in the world (with the exception of Canada), every aspect of US regulation is wide open to the public. There are no secret meetings, no secret documents. Any and all citizens and groups are invited to take part: individuals, industrial customers, government agencies, consumer groups, trade unions, the utility itself, even its competitors. Everyone affected by the outcome has a right to make their case openly, to ask questions of government and utilities, to read all financial and operating records in detail. In public forums, with all information open to all citizens, the principles of social dialogue and transparency come to life. It is an extra-ordinary exercise in democracy – and it works. … Another little-known fact is that, despite the recent experiments with markets in electricity [the authors published this book in 2003, just three years after the Enron privatization debacle], the US holds to the strictest, most elaborate and detailed system of regulation anywhere: Private utilities' profits are capped, investments directed or vetoed by public agencies. Privately owned utilities are directed to reduce prices for the poor, fund environmentally friendly physical and financial inspection. … Americans, while strongly attached to private property and ownership, demand stern and exacting government control over vital utility services.[54]

The authors are careful to note that this is “no regulatory Garden of Eden.” It has many failings: regulation is constantly under attack by promoters of market pricing, the public interest and the profit motive of investor-owned utilities often conflict with negative consequences for the public, and so on. [55] But even so, this long-established and indisputably successful example of democratic public regulation of large-scale industries offers us a real-world practical example of something like a “proto-socialism.” I see no obvious reason something like this model of democracy and transparency could not be extended, expanded, fully socialized and replicated to encompass the entire large-scale industrial economy. Of course, as I argued above, to save the humans, we would have to do much more than just “regulate” industries. We would have to completely reorganize and reprioritize the whole economy, indeed the whole global industrial economy. This means not just regulating but retrenching and closing down resource-consuming and polluting industries, shifting resources out of them, starting up new industries and so on. Those are huge tasks, beyond the scope of even the biggest corporations, even many governments. So who else could do this but self-organized masses of citizens, the whole society acting in concert, democratically? Obviously, many issues can be decided at local levels. Others like closing down the coal industry or repurposing the auto industry, require large-scale planning at national if not international levels. Some, like global warming, ocean acidification, deforestation, would require extensive international coordination, virtually global planning. I don’t see why that’s not doable. We have the UN Climate Convention, which meets annually and is charged with regulating GHG emissions. It fails to do so only because it lacks enforcement powers. We need to give it enforcement powers.

5. DEMOCRACY CAN WORK ONLY IN CONTEXT OF ROUGH SOCIO-ECONOMIC EQUALITY AND SOCIAL GUARANTEES.

When in the midst of the Great Depression, the great “people’s jurist” Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, “We can either have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. But we can’t have both.” He was more right than he knew. Today we have by far the greatest concentration of wealth in history. So it’s hardly surprising that we have the weakest and most corrupt democracies since the Gilded Age. If we want democracy, we would have to abolish “the great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few.” That means abolishing not just private property in the means of production, but also extremes of income, exorbitant salaries, great property, and inheritance. Because the only way to prevent corruption of democracy is to make it impossible to materially gain by doing so – by creating a society with neither rich nor poor, a society of basic economic equality.

Does that mean we would all have to dress in blue Mao suits and dine in communal mess halls? Hardly. Lots of studies (Wilkinson and Pickett’s Spirit Level, the UK’s New Economics Foundation studies, and others) have shown that people are happier, there’s less crime and

violence and fewer mental health problems in societies where income differences are small and where concentrated wealth is limited. We don't have five planets to provide the resources for the whole world to live the "American Dream" of endless consumerism. But we have more than enough wealth to provide every human being on the planet with a basic income, with a good job at pay sufficient to lead a dignified life, with safe water and sanitation, quality food, housing, education and health care, with public transportation – all the authentic necessities we really need. These should all be guaranteed as a matter of right, as indeed most of these already were declared as such in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

Freeing ourselves from the toil of producing unnecessary or harmful commodities – the three-quarters of current US production that's a waste – would free us to shorten the work day, to enjoy the leisure promised but never delivered by capitalism, to redefine the meaning of the standard of living to connote a way of life that is actually richer, while consuming less, to realize our fullest human potential instead of wasting our lives in mindless drudgery and shopping. This is the emancipatory promise of ecosocialism.[56]

6. THIS IS CRAZY, UTOPIAN, IMPOSSIBLE, NEVER HAPPEN

Perhaps. But what's the alternative? The specter of planetwide ecological collapse and the collapse of civilization into some kind of *Blade Runner* dystopia is not as hypothetical as it once seemed. Ask the Chinese. China's "capitalist miracle" already has driven that country off the cliff into headlong ecological collapse that threatens to take the whole planet down with it. With virtually all its rivers and lakes polluted and many depleted, with 70 percent of its croplands contaminated with heavy metals and other toxins, with undrinkable water, inedible food, unbreathable air that kills more than a million Chinese a year, with "cancer villages" metastasizing over the rural landscape and cancer the leading cause of death in Beijing,[57] China's rulers face hundreds of mass protests, often violent, around the country every day, more than 100,000 protest a year. And even with all their police-state instruments of repression, they know they can't keep the lid on forever (indeed, hundreds of thousands of Communist Party kleptocrats can see the writing on the wall through the smog and are moving their families, their money and themselves out of the country before it's too late). Today the Chinese and we need a socialist revolution not just to abolish exploitation and alienation but to derail the capitalist train wreck of ecological collapse before it takes us all over the edge. As China itself demonstrates, revolutions come and go. Economic systems come and go. Capitalism has had a 300-year run. The question is, will humanity stand by let the world be destroyed to save the profit system?

The Specter of Eco-Democratic Revolution

That outcome depends to a great extent on whether we, on the left, can answer that

question – “What’s your alternative?” – with a compelling and plausible vision of an eco-socialist civilization – and figure out how to get there. We have our work cut out for us. But what gives the growing global eco-socialist movement an edge in this ideological struggle is that capitalism has no solution to the ecological crisis, no way to put the brakes on collapse, because its only answer to every problem is more of the same growth that’s killing us. “History” was supposed to have “ended” with the fall of communism and the triumph of capitalism two decades ago. Yet today, history is very much alive. And it is, ironically, capitalism itself that is being challenged more broadly than ever and found wanting for solutions. Today, we are very much living in one of those pivotal world-changing moments in history, indeed it is no exaggeration to say that this is the most critical moment in human history. We may be fast approaching the precipice of ecological collapse, but the means to derail this train wreck are in the making as, around the world, struggles against the destruction of nature, against dams, against pollution, against overdevelopment, against the siting of chemical plants and power plants, against predatory resource extraction, against the imposition of GMOs, against privatization of remaining common lands, water and public services, against capitalist unemployment and *precarité* are growing and building momentum. Today we’re riding a swelling wave of near-simultaneous global mass democratic “awakening,” almost global mass uprising. This global insurrection is still in its infancy, still unsure of its future, but its radical democratic instincts are, I believe, humanity’s last best hope. Let’s make history!

The original version of this story appeared in the Real World Economics Review.

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[1] Tom Bawden, “Carbon dioxide in atmosphere at highest level for 5 million years,” *The Independent*, May 10, 2013 .

[2] Justin Gillis, “Heat-trapping gas passes milestone, raising fears,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2013. Scripps Institution of Oceanography, Scripps News, April 23, 2013 .

[3] Michael T. Klare, *The Race for What’s Left* (New York: Picador 2012), p. 24 Table 1.1. Jeffrey Sachs calculates that in value terms, between 1950 and 2008 the global human population rose from 2.5 billion to 7 billion, so less than tripled, while global GDP multiplied eight times. *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 19.

[4] On Shell’s impact on Africa, see Nimo Bassey, *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press 2012).

[5] Delly Mawazo Sesete of Change.org, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper says, "I am originally from the North Kivu province in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a deadly conflict has been raging for over 15 years. While that conflict began as a war over ethnic tension, land rights and politics, it has increasingly turned to being a war of profit, with various armed groups fighting one another for control of strategic mineral reserves. Near the area where I grew up, there are mines with vast amounts of tungsten, tantalum, tin, and gold – minerals that make most consumer electronics in the world function. These minerals are part of your daily life. They keep your computer running so you can surf the Internet. They save your high score on your Playstation. They make your cellphone vibrate when someone calls you. While minerals from the Congo have enriched your life, they have often brought violence, rape and instability to my home country. That's because those armed groups fighting for control of these mineral resources use murder, extortion and mass rape as a deliberate strategy to intimidate and control local populations, which helps them secure control of mines, trading routes and other strategic areas. Living in the Congo, I saw many of these atrocities firsthand. I documented the child slaves who are forced to work in the mines in dangerous conditions. I witnessed the deadly chemicals dumped into the local environment. I saw the use of rape as a weapon. And despite receiving multiple death threats for my work, I've continued to call for peace, development and dignity in Congo's minerals trade." "Apple: time to make a conflict-free iPhone," *The Guardian*, December 30, 2011. For more detail see conflictminerals.org. See also: Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World's Deadliest Place* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2011).

[6] Lauren McCauley, "Herbicides for GMOs driving monarch butterfly populations to 'ominous' brink," Common Dreams, March 14, 2013.

[7] James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren* (New York: Bloomsbury 2009), pp. 70, 172-173,

[8] John M. Broder, "Obama readying emissions limits on power plants," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2013.

[9] Center for Biological Diversity, "New mileage standards out of step with worsening climate crisis," press release, August 28, 2012. Also, Common Dreams staff, "New mileage standards encourage more gas-guzzling, not less: report," Common Dreams, August 28, 2012.

[10] A full-size 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air weighed 3,100 pounds. A '55 Ford F-100 pickup truck also weighed 3,100 (3,300 with the optional V-8 motor). Even a 1955 Cadillac El Dorado, icon of 1950s conspicuous consumption, weighed only 5,050 pounds – chrome bullets, tailfins and all. By comparison, today even a compact Toyota Prius weighs 3,274 pounds

(could it be the batteries?) while your typical full-size Ford Taurus weighs more than 4,300 pounds, pickup trucks and big SUVs start at around 6,000 pounds and go up from there to 7,000 to 8,000 pounds. Even though the occasional honest driver will concede he or she doesn't really "need" all this bulk and horsepower to load up at the mall, as a cheerful Texas Ford salesman noted, "We haven't found a ceiling to this luxury truck market." Joseph B. White, "Luxury pickups stray off the ranch," *Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2012.

[11] Your typical 4,428-pound 1955 Cadillac Coupe DeVille got 12.9 mpg in city driving, according to *Motor Trend* magazine, whereas your typical 5,963-pound 2013 Cadillac Escalade gets 10 mpg in the city (12 mpg "combined" city and highway). Your typical 2013 Chevrolet Silverado K15 truck gets just 9 mpg hauling those heavy bags of groceries home from the mall. This is after six decades of Detroit fuel economy "improvements" – and Obama says Detroit is going to "double its fleet mileage in 20 years." Good luck on that. Mileage figures for the Cadillac are from Cadillac History 1955. For the Silverado at www.fuel economy.gov.

[12] For forecasts of China's vehicle fleet and its implications see Craig Simons, *The Devouring Dragon* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2013), p. 200.

[13] "A new paradigm for climate change," *Nature Climate Change*, Vol. 2 September 2012, pp. 639-640 (my italics).

[14] IEA, World Energy Outlook 2012 Executive Summary (November 12, 2012), p. 3 .

[15] For a recent summary of the peer-reviewed literature see Glenn Scherer and DailyClimate.org, "Climate science predictions prove too conservative," Scientific American December 6, 2012 . Prominent ex-denier Richard A. Muller published his mea culpa on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*: "The conversion of a climate-change skeptic," July 28, 2012.

[16] World Resources Institute, WRI Navigating the Numbers, Table 1. pp. 4-5 .

[17] The Hill blog .

[18] See my "Green capitalism," op cit. pp. 131-133.

[19] Eg. David Biello, "The false promise of biofuels," *Scientific American*, August 2011, pp. 59-65.

[20] Smith, "Green capitalism," op cit. pp. 117-122.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] ExxonMobil, The Outlook for Energy: A View to 2040 (December 2012) . See also, Jon Queally, "BP's Big Plan: Burn it. Burn it all," Common Dreams, January 17, 2013.

[24] Eg. John Parnell, "World on course to run out of water, warns Ban Ki-moon," *The Guardian*, May 22, 22013. Gaia Vince, "How the world's oceans could be running out of fish," BBC News Online, September 12, 2012 . And as tropical forests, biodiversity is being sacrificed even in nominally protected areas at an alarming rate. See William F. Laurance et al. "Averting biodiversity collapse in tropical forest protected areas," *Nature*, no. 489 September 12, 2012 pp. 290-294. "Widespread local 'extinctions' in tropical forest 'remnants' " Also, ScienceDaily, August 14, 2012 . On minerals and oil, see Michael T. Klare, *The Race for What's Left* (New York: Picador 2012).

[25] Ecological "footprint" studies show that today humanity uses the equivalent of 1.5 planets to provide the resources we use and absorb our waste. This means it now takes the Earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year. Moderate UN scenarios suggest that if current population and consumption trends continue, by the 2030s, we will need the equivalent of two Earths to support us. And of course, we have only one. Turning resources into waste faster than waste can be turned back into resources puts us in global ecological "overshoot" depleting the very resources on which human life and biodiversity depend. See the Global Footprint Network.

[26] World Bank, 2008 World Development Indicators, p. 4 Table 1J .

[27] Worldwatch Institute, 2010 State of the World: Transforming Cultures From Consumerism to Sustainability (New York: Norton, 2010) pp. 3-7ff. Also Alan Durning, *How Much is Enough?* (New York: Norton 1992). Avatar.

[28] Michael T. Klare, *The Race for What's Left*, p. 12. AP, "Tech tycoons in asteroid mining venture," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2012.

[29] "China's environmental nightmare," China Digital Times, March 12, 2012 . Lily Kuo, "China's nightmare scenario: by 2025 air quality could be much much worse," posted March 12, 2013 on Quartz.

[30] See eg. Sam Wade, " 'Growth first' mentality undermines war on pollution," China Digital Times, June 5, 2013 .

[31] Hansen, Storms, chapter 9. Independent Voices: "James Lovelock: Nuclear power is the only green solution," Independent, May 24, 2004 . George Monbiot, *The Guardian* columnist, has argued this in many venues but see, in particular, his blog piece: "The moral case for nuclear power," August 8, 2011 . Also, Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, "Going green? Then go nuclear," *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, May 23, 2013.

[32] Keith Johnson and Ben Lefebvre, "U.S. approves expanded gas exports," *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2013.

[33] John Vogel, "Methane gas 'fracking:' 3 polls show public leaning to toward yes," *American Agriculturalist*, April 9, 2013 . Karen DeWitt, "Poll shows increased support for fracking," North Country Public Radio, September 13, 2012 .

[34] Clothing designer Eliza Starbuck says of ultra -cheap producers like H&M "It's throwaway fashion or 'trashion.' If their prices are that cheap that people are throwing their disposable income at them – only to find that the clothes fall apart on the hangers after a wash or two – they're just creating garbage. … It takes such a huge amount of human energy and textile fibers, dyes and chemicals to create even poor-quality clothes. They may be offering fashions at a price anyone can afford in an economic crunch, but they're being irresponsible about what happens to the goods after the consumers purchase them." Jasmin Malik Chua, "Is H&M's new lower-priced clothing encouraging disposable fashion?" ecouterre, September 28, 2010 . And H&M takes "disposable" literally. As *The New York Times* reported in 2012, H&M's employees systematically slash and rip perfectly good unsold clothes before tossing them in dumpsters at the back of the chain's 34th Street store in Manhattan – to make sure they can't be sold but thus adding pointlessly to landfills rather than donating them to charity. It is little remarked that capitalism is the first economic system in which perfectly serviceable, even brand new goods from clothes to automobiles (recall the "cash for clunkers" rebates) are deliberately destroyed so as to promote production of their replacements. I'll explore this interesting theme further elsewhere. See Jim Dwyer, "A clothing clearance where more than just the prices are slashed," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2010. Also, Ann Zimmerman and Neil Shah, "Taste for cheap clothes fed Bangladesh boom," *Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2013.

[35] Juan O. Tamayo, "STASI records show Cuba deal included IKEA furniture, antiques, rum and guns," McClatchy Newspapers, May 9, 2012. James Angelos, "IKEA regrets use of East German prisoners," *Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2012. Kamprad's soft spot for prison slave labor fits very well with his deep past as a Swedish Nazi recruiter and long-time sympathizer as detailed in a recent book by Elisabeth Asbrink. See "Ikea founder Ingvar Kamprad's Nazi ties 'went deeper,' " BBC News online August 25, 2011 .

[36] I am quoting here from Stephanie Zacharek's excellent "IKEA is as bad as Wal-Mart,"

Salon.com, July 12, 2009: 12:11 PM. Reviewing Ellen Ruppel Shell, *Cheap: The High cost of Discount Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2009), chapter 6.

[37] Ida Karisson, "IKEA products made from 600-year old trees," Inter Press Service, May 29, 2012 Common Dreams.org.

[38] Eg. Fred Pearce, "Ikea – you can't build a green reputation with a flatpack DIY manual, Guardian, April 2, 2009. Also: Greenpeace, Slaughtering the Amazon, July 2009 . Alfonso Daniels, "Battling Siberia's devastating illegal logging trade," BBC news online, November 27, 2009.

[39] Michael Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso 2006).

[40] World Bank Development Indicators 2008, cited in Anup Shah, Poverty and stats, Global Issues, January 7, 2013 . World Institute for Development Economics Research of the UN cited in James Randerson, "World's richest 1% own 40% of all wealth, UN report discovers," The *Guardian,* December 6, 2006. As for trends, in 1979 the richest 1% in the U.S. earned 33.1 percent more than the bottom 20 percent. In 2000 the wealthiest 1% made 88.5 percent more than the poorest 20 percent. In the Third World, polarization has grown even worse, especially in China which in 1978 had the world's most equal incomes while today, it has the most unequal incomes of any large society. Who says capitalism doesn't work?!

[41] Adam Nossiter, "For Congo children, food today means none tomorrow," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2012.

[42] Isabel Kershner, "Israeli venture meant to serve electric cars ending its run," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2013. Ronald D. White, "One owner, low miles, will finance: sellers try to unload Fiskers," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2013. Rachel Feintzeig, "Electric-car maker Coda files for bankruptcy," *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2013.

[43] Kenneth Chang, "Mars could have supported life long ago, NASA says," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2013. And Shell Oil isn't the only company having second thoughts about what its brilliant CEO thought was a sure thing: Clifford Krauss, "ConocoPhilips suspends its Arctic drilling plans," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2013.

[44] Citing a recent study by an international team of researchers in Nature Climate Change in May 2013, the BBC reports that if "rapid action" is not taken to curb greenhouse gases, some 34 percent of animals and 57 percent of plants will lose more than half of their current habitat ranges. Dr. Rachel Warren, the lead scientist of the study said that "our research predicts that climate change will greatly reduce the diversity of even very common species

found in most parts of the world. This loss of global-scale biodiversity would significantly impoverish the biosphere and the ecosystem services it provides. There will also be a knock-on effect for humans because these species are important for things like water and air purification, flood control, nutrient cycling and eco-tourism." Matt McGrath, " 'Dramatic decline' warning for plants and animals," BBC News Online, May 12, 2013 .

[45] On the existential threat Monsanto Corporation poses to humanity and the planet, see the Green Shadow Cabinet: "What must be done about Monsanto corporation, and why," May 23, 2013 .

[46] Gallup, June 8, 2012 .

[47] Huffington Post, "GMO poll finds huge majority say foods should be labeled," March 4, 2013 .

[48] See again, Green Shadow Cabinet, "What must be done about Monsanto, and why?" op cit.

[49] Eg. Jennifer Duggan, "Kunming pollution is the tip of rising Chinese environmental activism," *The Guardian* blog post May 16, 2013.

[50] Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Peaceful protest over Istanbul park turns violent as police crack down," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2013.

[51] "Turkish government moots referendum on Gezi Park," Deutsche Welle, June 12, 2013 .

[52] Simon Romero, "Protests grow as Brazilians blame leaders," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2013.

[53] For further exploration of these themes see the superb piece by Michael Lowy: "Eco-socialism and democratic planning," Socialist Register 2007 (New York: Monthly Review 2007), p. 294-309.

[54] Greg Palast, Jerrold Oppenheim, and Theo MacGregor, *Democracy and Regulation: How the Public can Govern Essential Services* (London: Pluto, 2003) pp. 2-4. The authors point out yet another irony of this system of public regulation, namely that it was created by private companies as the lesser evil to fend off the threat of nationalization: "Modern US utility regulation is pretty much the invention of American Telephone & Telegraph Company (AT&T) and the National Electric Light Association (NELA) – the investor-owned telephone and electric industries at the turn of the twentieth century. They saw regulation as protection against Populist and Progressive movements that, since the economic panic of

1873 and later disruptions, had galvanized anti-corporate farmer and labor organizations. By the turn of the twentieth century, these movements had galvanized considerable public support for governmental ownership of utilities. … ” p. 98.

[55] In the case of nuclear power plants, local public regulation often has been subverted and overridden by the federal government in its zealous drive to push nuclear power even against the wishes of the local public. Thus in the aftermath of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979, social scientists Raymond Goldsteen and John Schorr interviewed residents around Three Mile Island about the history of the power plant, why it was built, what voice they had in the decision to build it and the decision to restart the plant after the accident. It turns out that, as one resident, a Mrs. Kelsey, put it, they had no choice. They were virtually forced to accept it: “They [Met Ed the utility, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission] keep saying we need this nuclear. They keep pounding that into our heads with the news and everything. We need it. We need it. We can’t do without it.” Residents told Goldstein and Schorr that the surrounding communities petitioned against restarting the plant after the accident but lost again. Another resident, Mrs. Boswell, said, “We don’t want to be guinea pigs. … I still think that we should have a say, too, in what goes on. I really do, because we’re the victims.” Mrs. Brown: “The company just wants [to reopen the plant for] the money. … ” Mrs. Carmen: “No, they’re going to do what they want. … I don’t think [community feelings] would bother them at all.” Mrs. Hemmingway: “I feel very angry about it really, because I just feel that there is so much incompetence on the part of the utility, on the part of the NRC, on the part of the local governments. … ” Residents said that if they had been informed honestly about the risks and if they had had a choice, they would have investigated other technologies and chosen differently. Mrs. Hemingway again: “It just seems to me there are so many alternatives we could explore. … We obviously need alternate energy sources, but solar could provide heating for houses and water [and so on].” Residents said they would have preferred other choices even if it meant giving up certain conveniences: Mrs. Caspar: “I don’t really mind conserving all that much. If people can conserve gas [for cars], why can’t they conserve energy? Now I don’t mean I want to go back to the scrubboard … but I don’t dry my clothes in the dryer. I hang them … on the line … and I do try to conserve as far as that goes.” (pp. 181-183,212). One of the most interesting results of this study, which is well worth reading in full, is that it illustrates how ordinary citizens, given the chance, would make more rational decisions about technology, safety and the environment than the “experts” at the utility, Met Ed, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. It’s not that they were more knowledgeable about the technology than the experts but that the experts were not impartial. They were representing the industry and profits and the NRC, not the public, so they could not help but systematically make wrong decisions, decisions that in this case not only violated the public trust and but put huge numbers of lives in danger. Raymond L. Goldsteen and John K. Schorr, *Demanding Democracy After Three Mile Island* (Gainsville: University of Florida Press 1991).

[56] See again, Michael Lowy op. cit.

[57] Edward Wong, “Air pollution linked to 1.2 million premature deaths in China,” *The New York Times*. April 1, 2013. Johnathan Kaiman, “Inside China’s ‘cancer villages,’ ” *The Guardian*, June 4, 2012.

Richard Smith is an economic historian. He wrote his UCLA history Ph.D. thesis on the transition to capitalism in China and held post-docs at the East-West Center in Honolulu and Rutgers University. He has written on China, capitalism and the global environment and on related issues for New Left Review, Monthly Review, The Ecologist, the Journal of Ecological Economics, Real-World Economics Review, Adbusters magazine and other publications. He is presently completing a book on China’s communist-capitalism and ecological collapse.

Havin Guneser: On Kurdish Struggle at EZLN Hydra Seminar

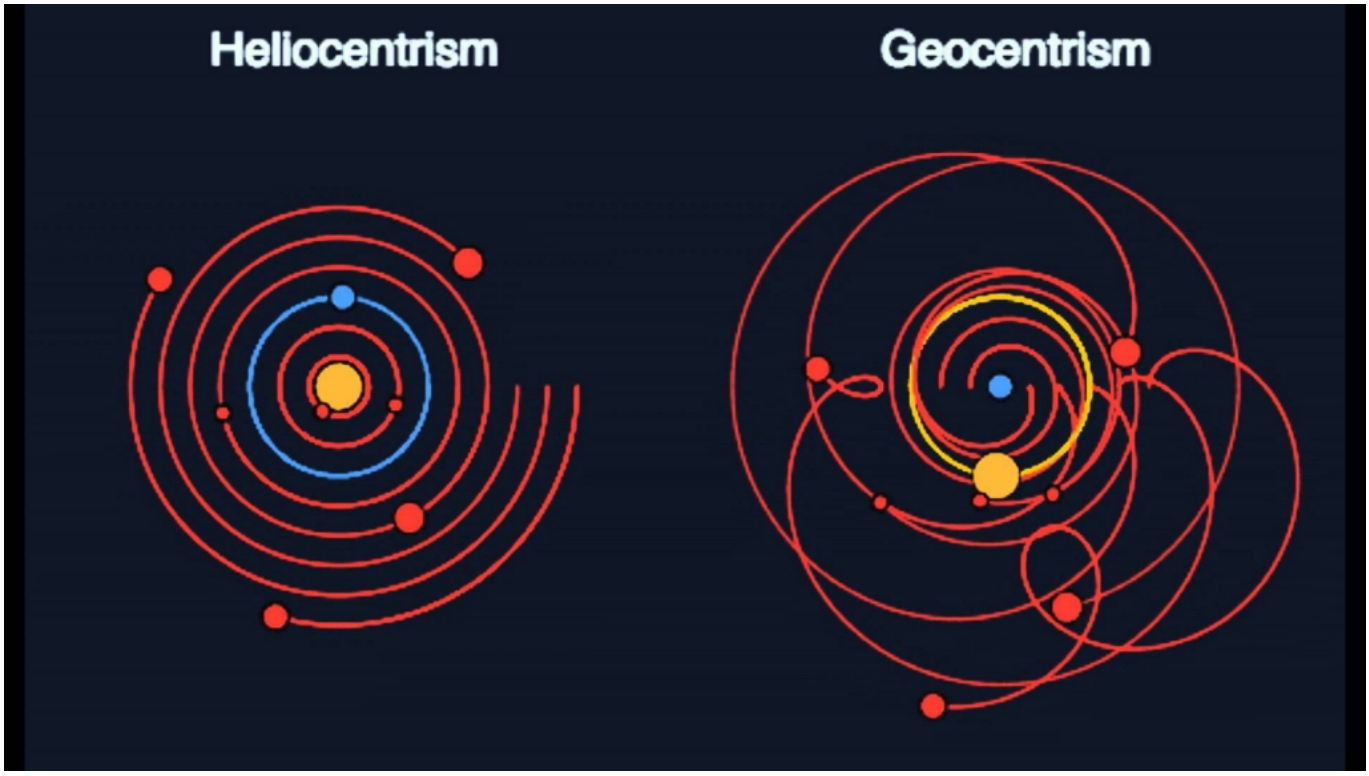
“Without understanding how masculinity was socially formed, one cannot analyze the institution of state and therefore will not be accurately be able to define the war and power culture related to statehood… This is what paved the way for femicide and the exploitation

and colonization of peoples…”

Listen to the full talk by Havin Guneser here.

Samantha Grossman: 1 in 4 Americans Apparently Unaware the Earth Orbits the Sun

This article was originally published Feb 16, 2014 at Time.



A National Science Foundation study involving 2,200

participants find that about 25 percent of Americans got this question wrong: ‘Does the Earth go around the sun, or does the sun go around the Earth?’

Does the Earth go around the sun, or does the sun go around the Earth?

When asked that question, 1 in 4 Americans surveyed answered incorrectly. Yes, 1 in 4. In other words, a quarter of Americans do not understand one of the most fundamental principles of basic science. So that’s where we are as a society right now.

The survey, conducted by the National Science Foundation, included more than 2,200 participants in the U.S., AFP reports. It featured a nine-question quiz about physical and biological science and the average score was a 6.5.

And the fact that only 74 percent of participants knew that the Earth revolved around the sun is perhaps less alarming than the fact that only 48 percent knew that humans evolved from earlier species of animals.

Here’s the thing, though: Americans actually fared better than Europeans who took similar quizzes — at least when it came to the sun and Earth question. Only 66 percent of European Union residents answered that one correctly.

We won’t know the full results of the survey—or its methodology—until the National Science Foundation delivers its report to President Obama and U.S. lawmakers. But on this evidence we may end up getting a new national holiday out of this: Spread the Word That the Earth Revolves Around the Sun Day.

Paul Mattick with John Clegg and Aaron Benanav: The Economic Crisis in Fact and Fiction

This article was originally published June 3, 2011 in The Brooklyn Rail.

SOURCE: UK PROGRESSIVE.

Paul Mattick's most recent book*, Business as Usual: The Economic Crisis and the Future of Capitalism*, was just published by Reaktion Books. In late April, he sat down with John Clegg and Aaron Benanav of the journal *Endnotes*.

Rail: Recent reports suggest that the economy is growing again. The unemployment rate is stabilizing, or even declining, and the Dow is trending upwards. So was the crisis really that deep? What makes you think that we haven't already seen the end of it?

Paul Mattick: Quite a few things. One is the ongoing difficulties in the world as a whole with regard to state finances and unemployment. It is a mistake to look simply at the United States. This is a global problem. There has been a parade of fiscal crises in Europe: in Portugal and to a certain extent Spain. The attempt to master the crisis has led to deepening depression-conditions in England and Greece. It has even reached China, where apparently high growth rates are leading to seemingly problematic rates of inflation—exactly like the pseudo-growth of the 1970s, which generated high inflation rates in the west. Even with respect to the United States, and I wouldn't be so impressed by measures such as employment going up and down. To a certain extent, this reflects the fact that people are dropping out of the labor force. There are of course minute changes from month to month in the number of people who get jobs, but overall conditions remain extremely poor.

It's also worth remembering that the GDP growth rate is an artificial construction. For example, since economic theory assumes that everyone who receives money is being paid for some service or good that has been produced, whenever someone from Goldman Sachs

gets a bonus, that appears as part of the growth figures. If you give Lloyd Blankfein a $35 million bonus, it's assumed that he has performed $35 million worth of services. The truth is that the growth rates are increasingly a measure of activity in the financial sector, so even today, all this remains completely imaginary. It's nice if a person here or there gets a job, but the truth is the city of Detroit is still 25 percent smaller than it was ten years ago. The unemployment rate in Tampa, Florida—which I happened to read about today—even if it is one percent lower than it was last month, is still 11 percent. All over the world unemployment rates remain high. There is very little lending from banks, very little investment, and very little actual economic growth.

Rail: You spoke about this being a world crisis. Could say a little more about the major state responses to the crisis? How coordinated were those responses at a global level? Were there differences in the way that the crisis was handled between the US, Europe and East Asia, or between rich and poor countries?

Mattick: I don't think the responses are very coordinated. As always in a period of crisis, there is an increase in competition: the different regions jockey to do the best they can for their national capitals. In the United States there was a small attempt at stimulus. It largely took the form of trying to preserve the financial structure, which is important not just in the United States but for the world economy. In Germany, they sat back and hoped that they would be able to export capital goods to other countries, while in the weaker economies of Europe, there were very serious collapses. The governments of Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Greece are now trying to safeguard the positions of local financial operators, to bail out the bond holders, to bail out the banks and to force local populations to bear the brunt of it. So the Euro bloc has become weaker as the better off countries, especially Germany and to a lesser extent France, find themselves having to pay for the collapsing situation in the weaker countries. In China, again, there is a different situation, because China doesn't have a normal capital market. The Chinese government controls internal finance and created an enormous amount of debt in order to stimulate the Chinese economy, which is now running into serious problems. They've spent two years building empty cities and financing real estate bubbles. Now they seem to be reaching the limit of this, which people are very afraid of, both in China and in the rest of the world.

So each part of the world deals with the crisis on a different basis. If you have a lot of oil, like Qatar or Saudi Arabia, then you can sell it to the West and have a lot of money to play with. You can spend $36 billion trying to lower the level of protest in your cities. But if you don't have any money, like Egypt, then you have to deal with a restless population. You are dependent on the richer countries propping you up.

Rail: Turning to the explanation of the crisis, we've often heard that the crisis was a matter of financial deregulation, but an alternative explanation common focuses on global trade

imbalances between the US and China. To what extent are these imbalances responsible for financial bubbles, and can they be corrected?

Mattick: Well, there are of course trade imbalances, but the question is, why are there imbalances? Production facilities have tended to move from high-wage areas to low-wage areas. For example, the United States moved production from the northern and middle-western states to the south, then to South America and Asia. Rather than investing in new machinery, companies are trying to increase profit rates by lower the cost of labor power globally. In China, a large percentage of production occurs in facilities that are the result of foreign investment. So there is a Chinese economy, but the Chinese export-economy mostly just assembles goods that are produced elsewhere. Europe, the United States and certain countries in Asia, like Japan or Taiwan, are moving production to China, where extremely low-wage workers put together stuff that is then shipped to the rest of the world. So to an extent the appearance of a shift of production to China is an illusion. These are Western companies hiring Chinese workers—and paying a portion of the proceeds to the Chinese bureaucracy, so they'll provide the production facilities and police the labor force. These factories remain dependent on Western investment and Western consumers. This is simply part of the attempt to lower labor costs in the West.

Rail: Internet econo-blogger Tyler Cowen recently wrote a book claiming that the US economy has been stagnant for the last forty years. He blames this stagnation on the exhaustion of existing technologies: "We have failed to recognize that we are at a technological plateau." Would you agree with this explanation?

Mattick: No. You could say that the Western economy—not just in the United States but in Western Europe also—entered into a period of crisis in the mid-1970s. So for forty years there has been, not exactly stagnation, but very low levels of growth compared to the period right after the Second World War. Of course, there has been a lower level of technological development in this period than there was in the past. But this is largely due to the fact that there has been less money to invest. You could say if they had gigantic quantities of money available, companies today could probably develop solar power. After all, they have to find some substitute for fossil fuels. They say that it's too expensive—but it's too expensive because there isn't sufficient capital to invest in the production of new forms of energy. To say that it's too expensive is simply another way of saying that capital is not generating quantities of profit sufficient for developing new technologies. The problem isn't that there aren't enough scientists in the world, or enough mathematicians or solar workers. The problem is that they don't have enough money. That also explains why, even with the existing technology, they're not able to employ millions of people in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There simply is not enough money to continue at the given scale of investment. So it's easy to blame this on a kind of failure of science, but that's not the problem. The engineers are there, the science is there. The problem is that nobody has the money to

invest in it, and that is a failure of capitalism to generate enough profit to continue its expansion.

Rail: But how much truth is there in this idea of stagnation, more generally? Wasn't there a recovery in the 1980s? To what extent is the crisis today related to the crisis of the 1970s?

Mattick: I think this is the crisis of the 1970s. What you had from the 1980s onwards was various kinds of speculative bubbles. There was a certain amount of gain—gains made by moving the labor force to low wage areas. But since labor is only a small part of the productive system at the present time, there has been a low rate of profit and little technological development. So, beginning in the mid-1970s, there has been a steady shift away from investment in production and into investment in speculation, the buying and selling of companies, mergers and acquisitions, finance, etc. Much of what was called globalization in the 1990s was simply the buying and selling of stocks in various parts of the world. You can even see this in the vocabulary. As I point out in my book, what used to be called developing nations are now called developing markets—but the markets they have in mind are stock markets and real estate markets. There has been a general flow of money from investment in production to investment in finance. From the mid-1970s on—as Professor Robert Brenner of UCLA points out—there has been a decline in levels of investment decade by decade, and a decline in profitability, and this is simply another way of describing a situation of stagnation.

What's going on now is the reappearance of the crisis that should have happened in the mid-1970s. The key idea in my book is that this crisis was put off by the creation of debt in all these forms: private debt, public debt, government debt. This was a historical novelty. There was a Keynesian idea during World War II that you could borrow money and then stop. But after the war, they were so afraid there would be a new crisis that they started to maintain, at all times, some low level of government spending. When the Golden Age ended in 1975, they got scared. There was an enormous outpouring of credit—and the invention of new credit instruments. And they managed in one way or another to put off the crisis for forty years. But there was a limit.

Finally it came in 2008—they just couldn't keep the whole thing going any more. The apparatus of debt had been erected on a foundation of IOUs, which became so great that it couldn't be sustained with respect to the actual production of value. I think this is a major event. I might be wrong—economics is not an exact science—but I think this is a deep depression. Some might compare it to the depression of the 1930s, but governments today don't have the money they had in 1930. There is no repetition in history—that's why you can't learn from the past—so this is an absolutely unique situation: a major depression, but one in which the Keynesian apparatus is no longer available because the money has already been spent. The US has 14 trillion dollars in national debt. So now they just don't know

what to do.

Rail: Could you tell us what actually explains the long-term decline in the world economy since the 1970s?

That's very complicated and contentious. Unfortunately, I believe that economics is a field in which the theories are mostly fake. Economics is more like a religion than a science. I think there is really only one explanation of the long term development of the capitalist system which seems to make sense, and which describes what has actually happened. This is the theory Karl Marx outlined *Capital*, which was published in the 19th century. This is a strange fact because today, for example in physics, no one would say we still have to read Newton. But the truth is that in the analysis of capitalism we have not advanced very far beyond Marx.

Basically Marx's idea is that capitalism, like every society, is an organization of the human production process, which means that people work on their natural environment and transform it into forms that they can consume. Human beings are peculiar in that this process is culturally rather than biologically determined. In our culture today, social reproduction is dependent on the fact that access to natural resources is controlled by a small group of people, through the medium of money. Which means that the people who actually control the production process are interested not in production per se, but in an increase in their social control, which we call the making of profits. Goods are only produced if they can be produced in such a way that the owners of the production process—of capital—are able to make a profit. But since the human labor involved in the production process is the only source of the increase in social wealth, and since, under capitalist conditions, the attempt of owners of industry to compete with each other leads to a displacement of labor by machinery, this leads—in a way which is very hard to explain in a few minutes—to a decline in the rate of profitability. Marx thought that the cure for this tendency would be the recurrent phenomena of depressions. In a depression, capital investments are devalued, which allows the labor performed using the existing means of production to count for more. So depressions should lead to periods of prosperity. Roughly that seems to be what has happened in the history of capitalism. There has been a tendency for periods of prosperity to lead to depressions, and periods of depression to lead to renewed prosperity. This process has been going on, more or less, since the beginning of the nineteenth century. We are now in a renewed period of depression, due to the large expansion of capital that took place after the Second World War.

This is an almost meaningless description of an extremely complicated phenomenon, but the truth is there is no simple way to talk about it. It's a very complex system, and it has to be analyzed in rather abstract terms. But as far as I can see, the history of capitalism as a system has pretty well confirmed Marx's analysis, even though he made it very close to the

beginning of capitalism. And I see no reason therefore to not accept that analysis as the explanation of what's going on today.

Rail: But hasn't economics made some advances since the 19th century? If not in contemporary academic economics departments, then at least through the great economists of the past hundred years, like Friedrich Hayek, Joseph Schumpeter, or John Maynard Keynes. Haven't they added something?

Mattick: Friedrich Hayek has a mathematically sophisticated version of the mid-18th century theory of the economy, which was somewhat inaccurate then and even more inaccurate now. The one figure who made some progress is Keynes, who understood that the economics he had learned in college was inadequate to explain the events of his own lifetime, particularly the Great Depression. He could see that the theory that people like Hayek still believed—that capitalism is a system which fully utilizes all natural and human resources—was nonsense. Not only had there been crisis after crisis in the 19th century. There was now a crisis in the 20th century that was very serious. So he could see that capitalism is unable to utilize fully the resources that nature and human beings put at the behest of the economy. Keynes was driven back to a version of theories from the early-19th century, when people questioned—in response to the development of capitalist crises of the beginning of that century—the dogma that capitalism was a completely rational, welfare-maximizing system. Keynes had the idea that if the capitalists were unable or unwilling, for various psychological reasons, to utilize their social resources to create full employment (and thus the full use of natural and human resources), then the government should step in and borrow resources to do so. By the time Keynes had this idea, governments had already been doing this: Hitler in Germany and Roosevelt in the United States. But the falsity of Keynes's analysis of the situation was shown after the Second World War, when it turned out that even during the ensuing period of prosperity, it was impossible for capitalist governments to cease to prop up the economy. The capitalist economy was not able to create a real prosperity on its own basis. It was still dependent on the government for additional finance. So the whole idea—that capitalism was naturally efficient but that under certain conditions inefficient, that in those moments the government could prime the pump, get the system going, and then withdraw—turned out not to be true. Thus Keynes's theory was already recognized by the 1970s to be a failure, which accounts for the disappearance of Keynesianism in academic economics and the rise of various anti-Keynesian economic theories—and even this von Miesean return to a primitive belief in the trucking and bartering of goods as the foundation of social peace.

Rail: Speaking of Keynes, your father (Paul Mattick) wrote something of underground classic on the subject—Marx and Keynes—in 1962. To what extent did you rely on your father's work when writing Business as Usual? On the surface, at least, we noted a stylistic difference between these two books. Does that indicate any difference of method?

Mattick: No, I would say not. And actually I would say that my father was very much a pupil of an earlier Marxist theorist, Henryk Grossman, who in one sentence of his great book *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System* already had the entire content of *Marx and Keynes*. Grossman pointed out that, since the government is not an economic actor—it does not own economic resources—government involvement in the economy can only be at the expense of the private economy. It cannot be profit-creating and therefore cannot solve the problems of capitalist profitability. What was important about my father's book is that it was a kind of thought experiment. The book was written in the late 1950s, although no one was willing to publish it. Everyone believed then that Keynesian methods had put an end to the business cycle, that the economy could now be controlled or even fine-tuned by government interventions. So my father said, let's assume that Marx's analysis is correct—what does that imply for the future of Keynesian methods? And he predicted more or less what happened: that Keynesianism would be unable to prevent a return of the business cycle—and even that the next depression would take the new form of a combination of inflation and stagnation. So you could say that it was one of the few examples in the history of social science in which there was an experiment, in which somebody said: okay, here's this thing that people are doing all over the world—will it work? If this theory's correct, then it can't work. It didn't work, so he was right. But actually I would say the credit doesn't belong to my father. It belongs to Mr. Marx. It was simply an attempt to say that if Marx was right, then Keynes must be wrong. And it turned out that Marx was right and Keynes was wrong. But this was something that no one was willing to recognize. So this book is completely unread, completely unmentioned, completely unnoticed. But from a scientific point of view it's an interesting phenomenon—that someone was able to make a prediction in social science that turned out to be correct. The fact that it has been ignored shows that, as a friend of mine once said, social science is mostly social and not very much science.

Rail: Contemporary left-economists, often relying on Keynes, have criticized recent austerity measures as detrimental to the recovery effort. Yet you argue that reductions in deficit-spending, with all their consequences for living standards, would be a necessary element of any real recovery on a capitalist basis. What would you say, then, to the workers who occupied the capitol building in Wisconsin? Are they acting in vain, or even against their own interests, if they want to retain their jobs?

Mattick: I would say that they are acting in their own interests insofar as what they are really fighting for is not the economy, but their pensions, their food, their living standards, their rent, etc. They are under an illusion if they think that their welfare is concordant with the welfare of the economy. People have to learn that the welfare of the economy, in a moment like this, is in contradiction to their own welfare. In Wisconsin, workers apparently went along with their unions, who were willing to sacrifice their members' living conditions in order to prop up the Wisconsin economy. A more rational point-of-view on the part of

Wisconsin workers would be to say, to hell with the Wisconsin economy!—we want food, we want boats to go sailing on the lake, we want pensions, and we want nice schools for our children. The truth is there is now a real conflict between the interests of ordinary people, so-called—that's to say the working class—and the interests of the capitalist economy. The preservation and future prosperity of capitalism demands the impoverishment of the population, and if they prefer to be impoverished to save capitalism, well then, they will be impoverished. The instinctual desire not to be impoverished seems to me a intelligent one, but the problem is that they don't yet understand that capitalism is not going give them back their pensions and their wages.

Rail: Does that mean that it's simply impossible to fight against cuts?

Mattick: I think that anti-austerity struggles have to become more radical. They have to concentrate on immediate material goods. For example, there are now millions of people who have been thrown out of their houses. There are a lot of empty houses, so people have to begin moving into those houses. There is a lot of food, so people have to take the food. If factories have closed, people need to go into the factories and start producing goods. But they cannot expect that employers are going to give them jobs. If they could be employed profitably, they already would be, as I say in the book. And they can't expect the government to give them jobs. The government doesn't have any money. But that doesn't mean there aren't important ways to fight austerity. This is still a rich country. There's all sorts of stuff around. People have to begin to take the stuff that's there. They have to demand the immediate improvement in their living conditions—very concrete things. So instead of asking for work, which they cannot get, they should just ask for food. A very intelligent move would be to say, OK, you can't give us jobs—then just feed us, feed us for nothing. It's not like there's no food.

Rail: Your book ends on a somber note—the vision of a coming catastrophe at once economic and ecological. We were hoping for a little more optimism from someone who believes, as you've said in another article, that another world is possible. Is this just an empty gesture or phrase? What is that other world, what does it look like, and what can people do to make it a reality?

Mattick: Well that's what is so frustrating because it's so obvious. We have this enormous productive apparatus. We have a world full of buildings, offices, schools, factories, farms, and technology. And there is absolutely no reason why people shouldn't simply take that stuff and start using it. What holds them back is that, on the one hand, it doesn't occur to them that they can do it and, on the other hand, that the police, the army—an enormous apparatus—prevents them from doing it. The way people are raised makes it very hard for them to think that you can just take this over, that this belongs to you. It's funny—I was reading an article written in 1831 by the French revolutionary Blanqui with the wonderful

title: “The man who makes the soup deserves to eat it.” He says it’s all very simple: if all the owners of capital were to disappear, the world would be exactly the same—you would have the same farms, the same factories—but if all the workers disappeared, then everyone would starve to death. We have not advanced one bit beyond that point of view. The problem is that people are so used to the existence of capitalism, they’re so used to the idea that you have to work for somebody else, that they don’t see that they can just take it over. What will move people to take that step? I think that it takes a very drastic experience to push people out of their normal mode of behavior.

This is why—although I don’t like catastrophe and personally I’m terrified by it like everybody else—you can see that there is a positive side, too. Let’s take a very present-day experience. People in Egypt have lived in tremendous poverty for a long time. But in the last year, the price of food went up by something like eighty percent. It just was too much. There was an enormous uprising. They got rid of Mr. Mubarak and his sons, and now they have General Tantawi—the army officers call him Mubarak’s poodle—Mr. Tantawi is running the country. So instead of Mubarak, his poodle is running the country. Nothing has changed. They’re in exactly the same position. Now they find—oh my God, it’s bigger. People think, OK, well, the next step would be to fight the army, but that’s a more serious problem. As long as the army was not willing to shoot you, you could get rid of one or two people. Now, how are you going to fight the army? You would have to have enormous strike movements and it would be very bloody, so you can see why people are scared.

However, it’s not impossible. The coming catastrophes are going to be gigantic—I read recently that the Indians are now building a wall between India and Bangladesh. They know that 100 million people are going to try to get into India just to live because of floods due to global warming and rising sea levels. So they are preparing to kill 100 million people. The American government is preparing militarily to prevent Mexicans from storming into the United States, as people starve in Mexico. So this is what the future holds. The existing situation is poised on an edge of catastrophe, which might take fifty years to unfold. At some point, people will have to deal with it. I don’t know if that’s optimism.

When I was younger, it seemed like it was about to happen: people in the streets, freedom, socialism—but it turns out that the human race is sluggish. The task is also scary. The army is big. Society is hard to understand, and no one really knows what’s going on. And it’s millions of people, and there’s religion, and there’s parents. I walk down the street, and I think, it’s just insane—don’t people know what’s happening? In 75 years this whole area is going to be under water, and they’re worrying about what kind of jeans they want to buy! It’s hard to imagine that what you experience right now is not going to be there in twenty years. During the First World War, it took until 1916 before the big demonstrations began in the cities of Germany. And it took another two years before people finally said, we’re not going to fight anymore. And that was rather mild—the First World War was nothing

compared to the Second, and that was nothing compared to what's coming now. Nearly 60 million died in the Second World War. Now we're talking about hundreds of millions starving to death and drowning. So that's why I'm not chipper about it. Socialism or barbarism, as Luxembourg said. Those are our two alternatives.

Cornel West: Goodbye, American neoliberalism. A new era is here

This article was originally published Nov 17, 2016 in The Guardian.

PHOTOGRAPH: ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The neoliberal era in the United States ended with a neofascist bang. The political triumph of Donald Trump shattered the establishments in the Democratic and Republican parties – both wedded to the rule of Big Money and to the reign of meretricious politicians.

The Bush and Clinton dynasties were destroyed by the media-saturated lure of the pseudo-populist billionaire with narcissist sensibilities and ugly, fascist proclivities. The monumental election of Trump was a desperate and xenophobic cry of human hearts for a

way out from under the devastation of a disintegrating neoliberal order – a nostalgic return to an imaginary past of greatness.

White working- and middle-class fellow citizens – out of anger and anguish – rejected the economic neglect of neoliberal policies and the self-righteous arrogance of elites. Yet these same citizens also supported a candidate who appeared to blame their social misery on minorities, and who alienated Mexican immigrants, Muslims, black people, Jews, gay people, women and China in the process.

This lethal fusion of economic insecurity and cultural scapegoating brought neoliberalism to its knees. In short, the abysmal failure of the Democratic party to speak to the arrested mobility and escalating poverty of working people unleashed a hate-filled populism and protectionism that threaten to tear apart the fragile fiber of what is left of US democracy. And since the most explosive fault lines in present-day America are first and foremost racial, then gender, homophobic, ethnic and religious, we gird ourselves for a frightening future.

What is to be done? First we must try to tell the truth and a condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. For 40 years, neoliberals lived in a world of denial and indifference to the suffering of poor and working people and obsessed with the spectacle of success. Second we must bear witness to justice. We must ground our truth-telling in a willingness to suffer and sacrifice as we resist domination. Third we must remember courageous exemplars like Martin Luther King Jr, who provide moral and spiritual inspiration as we build multiracial alliances to combat poverty and xenophobia, Wall Street crimes and war crimes, global warming and police abuse – and to protect precious rights and liberties.

The age of Obama was the last gasp of neoliberalism. Despite some progressive words and symbolic gestures, Obama chose to ignore Wall Street crimes, reject bailouts for homeowners, oversee growing inequality and facilitate war crimes like US drones killing innocent civilians abroad.

Rightwing attacks on Obama – and Trump-inspired racist hatred of him – have made it nearly impossible to hear the progressive critiques of Obama. The president has been reluctant to target black suffering – be it in overcrowded prisons, decrepit schools or declining workplaces. Yet, despite that, we get celebrations of the neoliberal status quo couched in racial symbolism and personal legacy. Meanwhile, poor and working class citizens of all colors have continued to suffer in relative silence.

In this sense, Trump’s election was enabled by the neoliberal policies of the Clintons and Obama that overlooked the plight of our most vulnerable citizens. The progressive populism of Bernie Sanders nearly toppled the establishment of the Democratic party but Clinton and Obama came to the rescue to preserve the status quo. And I do believe Sanders would have

beat Trump to avert this neofascist outcome!

In this bleak moment, we must inspire each other driven by a democratic soulcraft of integrity, courage, empathy and a mature sense of history – even as it seems our democracy is slipping away.

We must not turn away from the forgotten people of US foreign policy – such as Palestinians under Israeli occupation, Yemen's civilians killed by US-sponsored Saudi troops or Africans subject to expanding US military presence.

As one whose great family and people survived and thrived through slavery, Jim Crow and lynching, Trump's neofascist rhetoric and predictable authoritarian reign is just another ugly moment that calls forth the best of who we are and what we can do.

For us in these times, to even have hope is too abstract, too detached, too spectatorial. Instead we must be a hope, a participant and a force for good as we face this catastrophe.