

The Ecological Crisis of Capitalism and Human Survival

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There are few well informed people nowadays who do not know that from an ecological point of view the human species is in deep trouble. If things continue to develop as they have over the past fifty years for another century or two—a very short time by historical standards—it is virtually certain that civilised life as we know it today will no longer be possible in large parts of the planet and its survival elsewhere will be problematic at best. A few years ago views of this kind would have been generally dismissed as the ravings of ecological extremists. No longer. Statements like the following from an impeccably mainstream source are no longer exceptional: “We cannot continue in our present methods of using energy, managing forests, farming, protecting plant and animal species, managing urban growth, and producing industrial goods. We certainly cannot continue to reproduce our own species at the present rate.” This comes from the prestigious Business Council for Sustainable Development whose members include a representative sample of the top officers of the world’s biggest multinational corporations: Chevron Oil, Mitsubishi, Ciba-Geigy, Dow Chemical, and DuPont, to name a few (Stephen Schmidheiny and the Business Council for Sustainable Development, *Changing Course: A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment*, MIT Press, 1992).



A gas pipeline burns after a collision with a barge and the tugboat Shannon E. Setton near Perot Bay in Lafourche Parish, LA (30 miles south of New Orleans) on March 13, 2013. (U.S. Coast Guard photo courtesy of Coast Guard Air Station, New Orleans) U.S. Coast Guard District 8. By [DVIDSHUB](#) - [Flickr](#), [CC BY 2.0](#), [Link](#).

It is somewhat surprising that such a sweeping assessment should come from the controlling stratum of society which is responsible for the practices said to be driving us toward disaster. But what is really surprising is that this assessment should be accompanied by a frank admission that those who are responsible and have the power to make changes are the very ones who have the least reason to want to do so. "The painful truth," according to the Council, "is that the present is a relatively comfortable place for those who have reached positions of mainstream political or business leadership. That is the crux of the problem of sustainable development, and perhaps the main reason why there has been great acceptance of it in principle, but less concrete actions to put it into practice: many of those with the powers to effect the necessary changes have the least motivation to alter the status quo that gave them that power."

This is undoubtedly true as far as it goes. But it clearly does not go far enough. Let us suppose that those who occupy the

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positions of political and economic power in this society have been not only converted to the doctrine of "sustainable development" but have also overcome their reluctance to make the necessary changes that this requires. Fossil-burning energy industries must be phased out; a transportation system based on the internal

combustion engine must be replaced, necessitating a comprehensive relocation of producing and consuming centers; polluting technologies must be banned or reduced to an absolute minimum—these are just a few of the most obvious "necessary changes" that would have to be initiated and carried through over a long period of time. Can you really imagine corporate and political leaders starting out to do these things? The chairman of General Motors, for example, appearing before a Senate Committee to urge the necessity of downsizing the automobile industry by some 90 percent? How long would he remain chairman?

The point is an important one: what is at issue is not the personal inclinations of those in power but the nature of the power structure that put them there. In this society that structure is based at every level, directly or indirectly, on making profits—not in some visionary future, but here and now, today and tomorrow. Those who refuse to play the game are soon eliminated or marginalised. In other words, they can hold onto their power only if they do not try to use it for purposes incompatible with the historically determined nature of the power structure itself.

This does not mean of course that no ecologically beneficial changes can be made without changing the nature of the

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power structure. It is quite possible, for example, that solar energy for many purposes is, or soon will be, cheaper to produce than fossil-fuel energy. If so, replacement is a possibility, though probably only as a result of overcoming determined resistance by the losers. But the reorganisation of society to minimise, let alone eliminate, dependence on the automobile would be something entirely different. Such radical

changes, and there are certainly many others as urgently needed in the same category, could be realised only with the active and committed support of a new and differently based power structure.

For better or worse, this line of reasoning leads to the inescapable conclusion that the kind of power structure that prevails in most of the world today is incapable of meeting the most basic survival needs of the species. And this in turn means that only a change in the nature of power structures on a global scale could bring a realistic hope for the long-term continuation of human civilisation.

This is obviously not a welcome, let alone popular, view these days. But serious people should be asking not who likes or dislikes it but whether or not it is true. If you think it is not true, please explain why. If you think that it is true, what do you think are the implications?

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