

The Climate Justice Movement Splits from Environmentalists

by Lorna Salzman

The science behind climate change is well known: an overabundance of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases, raising the average global temperature and causing widespread melting of glaciers and ice shelves that could raise sea level by one meter (a conservative estimate) to three meters (likely by the end of this century if we continue business as usual). The lack of a commensurate response to this situation is due to disastrous economic policies intended to maximize economic growth, production and overconsumption, all promoted by the underpricing of energy, plus a lack of adequate regulation. As a result, we are headed towards a point of no return that will inevitably condemn human societies to ecological and social chaos. All the most progressive social policies in the world will not prevent this.

The consequences of ignoring the scientific evidence will be overwhelmingly negative for the objectives of both environmental and social justice activists. Most disturbing of all, social justice activists, long hostile to environmentalism, are now cohorts, if unwitting, of the right-wing climate change deniers. One waits anxiously to see which of the latter will be the first to boast that their doubts about the climate crisis are shared by social justice activists, who may not dismiss the scientific evidence but are in effect banishing ecological concerns by redefining climate change as “climate justice.”

Since the 1970s – and I stand as witness – the American Left and communities of colour have shunned traditional environmental activism for

complex reasons, not all of which are easily explained. What they established, and what is still operative today, is a kind of intellectual apartheid of their own making.

It is true that no movement is required to alter its identity or objectives. Self-determination in political activism is and should be the rule, with the assumption that there are good reasons for a movement’s refusal to join or work with other movements that do not appear to have relevance to its concerns. But often there are nefarious reasons which must be concealed and public reasons that must appear plausible so as to justify the “separate but equal” principle. The accusation against the whole environmental movement of “environmental racism,” of discrimination and of disdain for social justice issues, became the publicly plausible reason. It is an accusation not supported by any objective evidence.

In order to cement their own constituency and community sovereignty, inner city minority communities chose to define what most of us would call environmental problems as social justice and disempowerment problems. At this point it is important to note that the difference between urban and rural communities looms large. Rural dwellers’ issues tend to be more connected to conservation issues such as water resources, deforestation, agriculture and local land-related conflicts. As such, rural minorities would be more sympathetic to the early conservation concerns of the environmental movement, such as wilderness, old growth forests, habitat, endangered species and pollution of water bodies.

But urban problems are more oriented to and determined by large industrial and commercial ventures: transportation, garbage and sanitation, energy, roads, construction and issues of urban infrastructure. Complicating this are the numerous powerful interests of builders, developers, construction unions, financiers and regulatory bureaucracies, which add a top-heavy economic and political superstructure of special interest groups and institutional entities. Under the circumstances, environmental problems seem less connected to human and ecosystem health than to the abuse of public power by corporations, government and special interest groups, and at first glance appear to have no connection to poverty, which is of immediate and more compelling relevance to minority communities.

Seen in this light, the hostility to and attacks on environmentalism that began in the 1970s might seem logical and justified. The national environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund and others, having solicited members

and monetary support for their activities, were now being entrusted with defending the NATIONAL interest for all citizens. Balancing the formulation of national policy with important local battles was imperative. As a result, the more activist of these groups such as Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth established state, city and local chapters to address local issues, while taking on the broader national problems involving federal regulation at their Washington office. These issues of national import necessarily were focused on natural resources (air and water), public lands, energy infrastructure and land use patterns, involving federal regulation and often funding.

But it was the national offices of these organizations that came to represent the entire organiza-

tion, while local activists struggled financially to address local concerns, which not coincidentally required confronting similar bureaucratic and regulatory adversaries at the local level. It is at this point that one gets the first look at and initial understanding of the hostility to environmentalists from black communities and the Left. Because of the self-imposed separation of these communities from the white middle-class environmental groups, these communities were left on their own to deal with their local problems, for better or worse.

The complexion of environmentalism was overwhelmingly white but the reasons for this are more complex. No one and no force ever prevented blacks from joining or working alongside the movement, though admittedly their focus on community problems was primary. From its inception in the late sixties and early seventies, the environmental movement consisted largely of local or regional

groups and unpaid volunteers. The high-priced lawyers and overhead came much later, after these groups expanded and started obtaining substantial foundation grants. Initially, funds allowed for the establishment of a

basic Washington DC presence for lobbying and national media but little more. Nothing stood in the way of minorities joining these groups locally and integrating their concerns. One weeps at the thought of how much more progress we would have achieved early on had the black activist community not shunned a broader partnership for resistance to the forces responsible for urban AND rural destruction.

Now we must fast-forward to the era of globalization, economic inequality and the slow collapse of industrial capitalism. But even after nearly half a century of activism there is no national dialogue, much less consensus, on how to solve the problems that these forces now present. Even within the environmental movement there is dis-

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agreement on strategies, tactics and objectives. The ill-advised opposition to a proposed Washington state carbon tax by some environmentalists and black activist Van Jones killed what might have been an important initial step towards a sane energy policy. Of significant influence on business are the Breakthrough Institute's books and research, which define most environmental problems as caused by a lack of "prosperity," which, they assert, can only be rectified by full speed ahead on economic growth and consumption.

On one end of the environmental spectrum is the traditional Left which looks to technology and a socialist utopia to erase poverty. Towards the centre lurks the Nature Conservancy, also celebrated by corporations for its enthusiastic technophilia, champion of the anthropocentric principle that Nature in its wild state no longer exists and that humans are not mere stewards of the natural world but its designer and manager, based of course on "green" principles (mainly cleaning up and restraining polluters). "Ecocentric" environmentalists, those who put the well-being of ecosystems and biodiversity at the forefront, are at the other end of the spectrum.

Holding what corporations deem leftist and anti-capitalist views are environmentalists as a whole and their associates, some still beholden to little more than a clean-up/anti-pollution vision and happy to work, as the Environmental Defense Fund does, with corporations to promote a "green image." Even Bill McKibben and 350.org have made an appeal to corporations to "green up" their work and image for public approval and financial gain.

What environmental leaders said then and what most say now is this: that tinkering and technology are nothing more than the proverbial gnat biting the elephant, or the re-arrangement of deck chairs on the Titanic. They now understand

that the entire industrial growth-worshipping society has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster and must be replaced by a new model that removes humans and their needs from the top of the ecological pyramid and places them on an equal footing with non-humans and the earth's natural systems. In this view it is arguable that such a radical change would at the very least facilitate and likely subsume all the social justice issues of concern. The reverse, a society characterized by social justice, would not, however, subsume the ecological imperative, social justice being necessary but not sufficient, a point that the late Murray Bookchin and other leftists failed to understand.

It is this analysis that has brought social justice and ecology into direct conflict. But this conflict

was not inevitable, at least not to those who have objectively identified the origins and consequences of the economic growth economy. Anyone who has taken the trouble to inform herself can see that there

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are various scenarios and benefits that will be derived from shifting to a steady-state, decentralized, local economy-dependent society reliant on renewable energy alone and on small-scale solutions that empower both individuals and their community economy. These scenarios are the only ones that will also preserve democracy, a concept strikingly absent from present debates on energy policy and economic theories. Democracy must not be allowed to take second place to concepts like social justice and ecological sustainability; it must be put front and center in public discourse.

Today, the climate change crisis has awakened social justice activists, who seem to understand that it is the poor who will suffer the most if climate change is not mitigated. They will suffer materially in terms of their homes and communities. But they will also suffer because when catastrophic climate change hits, the needs of the poor will be

ignored; every community will be placed in a crisis situation requiring huge financial investment that would otherwise be available for the poor. This crisis will silence cries for social justice, which will be moved to the back burner indefinitely.

The other consequence of climate chaos could well be a crisis of democracy. Because of climate change deniers and fence-sitting useful idiots in the media, the onset of the crisis is likely to necessitate a new authoritarianism. The public will have to give its unquestioning support for whatever the government deems necessary to avoid conflict, instability and anti-social behavior. Naomi Oreskes has pointed out that the climate denial by neo-cons and free market advocates will, by preventing serious action now to curb climate change, necessarily result in the authoritarian regulation by government that they so loudly oppose today.

At a recent climate conference, the long-time head of a leading black group in Harlem stated baldly: "Climate change is not a result of environmental or scientific causes; it is a result of social injustice." There, in a nutshell, is the first step towards DEFINING CLIMATE CHANGE OUT OF EXISTENCE. But in so doing, social justice activists let the polluters and destroyers off the hook while claiming to define the character and set the direction of the movement to head off climate change. At its worst, it resembles some of the climate change deniers' arguments.

This social (in)justice approach champions renewable energy as its instrument, with the implication that by merely changing our energy systems we will bring about the socially just society that we all seek. But this approach lacks the comprehensive analysis, at the heart of environmentalism,

of the other systems we need to support human endeavor. It is this analysis that incorporates the broader issues of governance and democracy, global capitalism, trade, overpopulation, the loss of biodiversity, and destruction of indigenous cultures into an ecological paradigm. In this light, social justice movements fall far short, lacking an inclusive global model incorporating ecology AND social justice.

Worse, it is an anti-science position, and in this respect it is especially destructive, mirroring not just right-wing deniers of climate change but extreme Left post-modernists who have instilled

distrust in the American public of science in general and allowed the resurgence of anti-intellectualism and irrationality in public discourse. The Harlem leader has skillfully, in one sentence, managed to align herself and presumably her cohorts on the side of the adversaries of social justice, by casting doubt on the scientific consensus and data that prove the reality of climate change.

But there are more implications, some

connected to the battles on American campuses about free speech, trigger warnings and "safe spaces," about the "hurt feelings" and the taking of offense at having to read white male authors. This battle is the vanguard of the New Authoritarianism, which is edging close to Stalinism. It is a vanguard that not only stifles dissent, reason and science but rules out any debate that, in this view, deprecates or marginalizes what some call the "oppressed."

This battle is taking place not just on campuses but on the internet, in blogs and journals. And while it loudly demands "diversity," in fact it often acts to smother it, using "intersectional-

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ity” as the excuse, on the false assumption that everyone in a movement agrees with everyone else in the movement on every issue. It is a demand for uniformity and conformity, and once announced, it will infect the rest of society and injure the imperative of free inquiry and dissent. At its core, it denies the multiple identities of each individual and views them primarily as a member of a group, squeezing individual rights into the undemocratic and untenable category of group rights. Indeed, the late Christopher Hitchens denounced this use of “epidermis and genitalia” as the basis for thought.

The sad fact is that the authoritarianism of the Left (with which new radical black and feminist groups are aligned, based on their “intersectionality” principle), which started by supporting Stalin and later figures such as Mao, Castro, Pol Pot and Chavez, has now re-surfaced as a defense of social justice, edging out other movements for change. In this it has been spectacularly successful in intimidating many liberals and the media from questioning the real motives as well as consequences of forcing citizens to swear unconditional fealty to the whole social justice agenda.

Many who do not know the history of the American Left (probably the majority of students today) have inherited the Regressive Left argument that environmentalism is a movement defending its own backyard; this argument was also made at the same conference I attended. While examples abound of self-described environmentalists with narrow NIMBY (“Not in my back yard”) concerns such as opposition to offshore wind turbines, this accusation is, more often than not, lacking in merit and is usually injected into local debates by those with a personal or financial interest in overcoming local opposition.

Today the intense national discourse over race and racism has nearly silenced the environmental debate despite the fact that the comprehensive objectives of environmentalists would in large measure involve economic and energy policies that would directly benefit the poor and the politically marginalized by identifying and confronting not the symptoms but the roots of both the ecological and social justice crises.

Not only would material benefits accrue to workers and communities from the transition to a renewable energy economy, but policies to retrofit homes for greater energy efficiency would reduce energy costs, as would a beefed-up commitment to public transportation. New small and local enterprises would replace high-cost big industry requiring large capital investments. The power of corporations would be substantially reduced and replaced. Many of the obstacles to minority community economic development would disappear. Small-scale localization of commerce, especially food and energy production, would keep money within communities.

It is difficult to overstate the economic and social benefits of renewable energy and the re-localization of commerce and industry. At the same time, it is all too easy to overlook what the continued neglect of the planet’s systems and functions will bring. Sadly, these are not discussed side by side. Ecology is not included in the “intersectionality” debate. These facts are what the social justice activists need to acknowledge when they accuse environmentalists of ignoring the poor and inner city communities. If they take the trouble to look, they will discover that an environmental society and paradigm subsume all of their concerns and will go far to accomplish their social justice objectives. But the reverse – that social justice must precede an environmental agenda – is not true, and in any case we do not have enough time left to await that Utopia of a perfect society. Social justice is necessary...but insufficient. Ultimately, the dialogue between both movements must be about capitalism.

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