

HOUSE ORGAN

The Time Has Come

And now for the good news about global warming . . .

Early in May, 2007, the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its final report to an expectant world. This, the *Summa Climatologica* of the scientific community, was devoted to the question of “mitigation,” that is, what can be done to reduce the Greenhouse Effect, and what would it cost us. Judging from the collective sighs of relief with which the report was received, the IPCC had given society a green light to continue on its present path.

The BBC’s website was typical in its enthusiasm. “Climate change ‘can be tackled,’” said the headline, and under a photo of a pair of hands counting out what appeared to be a very large amount of cash, we read that “Tackling climate change need not cost the Earth, the IPCC says.” In the article itself, the IPCC’s chair, Rajendra Pachauri, called the report “stunning,” adding that “human society as a whole has to look for changes in consumption patterns” if this was to be realized.

The essence of IPCC’s good news was that society in its existing form could avoid calamitous global warming with a sacrifice of an acceptable loss of economic output (measured as global Gross Domestic Product), and even, in some scenarios, with a gain in economic product. In other words, the regime of global capital could press on as before, its vital “growth” secured, with various substitutions and efficiencies to see it through the crisis.

It’s all in the numbers: Presently, atmospheric CO₂ stands at around 380 parts per million, having climbed from pre-industrial levels of roughly 280 ppm, while the mean global temperature has risen by about 1° Celsius during the same period. The consensus among climate scientists is that we must limit CO₂ to under 450 ppm by the year 2030 in order to keep the increase to a relatively safe level of no more than 2° C. On this basis, say the journalists, the IPCC report concludes that the trick could be done with such mitigation measures as energy substitution and new transport systems that would cost less than 3 percent of global GDP. If the world were willing to settle for a “lite” makeover, it could have it for a mere 0.2-2.5 percent of GDP and arrive at between 535 ppm and 590 ppm; and if it really wanted to keep raking in the wealth, it could opt for the package that held CO₂ to between 590 ppm and 710 ppm, with a range of economic growth that went from a decrease of 1.2 percent to a miraculous increment of 0.6 percent.

This is the news that caused smiles to break out all over and glasses to be raised to more and cleaner growth. Is there anything wrong with this story? Let me count some of the ways.

- First, there is the inconvenient fact that the IPCC simply does not promise what the reporters said it does, namely, a mitigation of global warming. If this requires keeping the mean temperature increase at or below the limit of 2° C, as climate scientists say,

then no scenario provided by the IPCC is mitigative. Somehow, the bearers of good news overlook the fact that within the report itself, all the scenarios of response accept that atmospheric CO₂ will be greater than 450 ppm by 2030 (or 2050 in other sections), and on this basis predict that global temperature rise will in all cases be greater than 2° C. If we keep CO₂ between 450 ppm and 535 ppm, we get between 2° and 4° increase; while 535-590 ppm is correlated with a rise of between 3° and 5°; finally, the big money option that actually holds out the hope of an increase in GDP by allowing CO₂ to rise to between 590-710 ppm is correlated with a mean global temperature that will be 4° to 6° C (about 9° F) higher than the present.

- All these figures are unacceptable. Aside from the hellish immediate effects of heat, drought, storms, etc., the prospect of global warming greater than 2° C opens upon the nightmarish phenomena of runaway positive feedback loops, for example, the release of sequestered methane from melting permafrost, or loss of the albedo effect by the loss of ice and snow cover. Needless to say, what is lost as ice, returns as rising seas—with all that this portends. The figure of an increase of between 4° and 6° C, in fact, is often cited as the tipping point beyond which the collapse of civilization becomes a real possibility. This is the Good News about the future? What should we think of a society whose main news media are so dishonest and/or incompetent as to blithely read catastrophe as a happy outcome?

- The reporters are aided by the IPCC itself, a global techno-bureacracy, with mechanistic thinking to match. Whatever the individual scientists who make up its membership may think, the IPCC does not comprehend process, dialectic and the whole. Its caution should not be mistaken for prudence. It is, rather, the product of tunnel vision and the associated lack of imagination. Thus IPCC worships predictability and is made queasy by non-linearity. Its report prates on about lifestyles, health benefits, and the like, yet regards as entirely unproblematic certain nasty and very destructive technologies like nuclear power and biofuels, which it deems necessary to overcome the petrocarbon/global warming problem. Meanwhile, the positive feedback mechanisms mentioned above are tucked away in thickets of opaque prose: “if the damage cost curve increases steeply, or contains non-linearities (e.g. vulnerability thresholds or even small probabilities of catastrophic events), earlier and more stringent mitigation is economically justified.” This is deadly, obfuscatory nonsense. Given the gravity of global warming, what it calls “small probabilities of catastrophic events” are precisely the all-too-real harbingers of non-linear change that have already made the news: the opening up of arctic seas, the accelerating factors that seem to be at play in the melting of Greenland’s ice caps, the fissuring tundra permafrost, and so forth. How small is small? In any case, the IPCC is saying, in effect, that it will wait until it is too late, and only then will it recommend acting radically.

- The decisive element is the economy: no serious action is to be taken unless it is “economically justified.” Not justified in terms of saving life, or civilization, or our children, mind you . . . no, these do not “count” in the great scheme of things. There is a twofold elision of difference here: judgments about the economy are assumed equivalent to judgments about society as a whole; and the economy itself is assumed to be a purely rational process in which all share equivalently. There is no ruling class

in the IPCC's worldview; and no sense of any potential alternative to the current system: the economy stands for all of society; the economy is impersonal, benign and rational; it is measured in terms of pure quantity like GDP. Being such, it is a beneficent god before whom all must bow and scrape.

- Some further words about this economy before we move on. The dominant ideology flattens everything out into quantification. Thus whatever makes or involves money is summed into GDP, whether this be manifestly destructive, ugly, or ecocatastrophic. SUVs happen to be better for GDP than small hybrids, and the automobile economy is better for GDP than one based on public rail transport; that's just the inevitable result of turning society over to the principle of accumulation, which is to say, to subordinate quality to quantity. So long as capital continues to organize consent to its rule—a process in which it has been brilliantly successful—the delusions of the economy can be sustained. But whether capitalist growth can be sustained is another matter. Perhaps I am too cynical about such things and unappreciative of economic science, but the forecasts launched in the IPCC report seem to me to have no more predictive value than soothsaying by means of the entrails of chickens. However, they do tell us some general things: that mitigation of global warming will mean an economic decline, as is always is the case when “externalities” like letting nature be polluted are internalized; and further, that this decline will be greater the more mitigation is achieved. Finally, to talk of economic progress at the high end of the spectrum of rising temperatures is frankly insane. A “growth” at the cost of allowing mean temperature to rise 4° to 6° from current levels annihilates all sense of an economy as something that provides “goods.” At that point, rises in GDP will essentially consist of factors such as money made on flood-control equipment, body bags, and police technologies to control migrating masses of people. Moreover—and here we take into account what the IPCC simply cannot, namely, that capitalism is a ruthless class society—we can be quite certain that any decline in GDP will be unevenly distributed and fiercely contested. There are always winners and losers in capitalism's class system, and the prospect of decline will excite among capitalist elites a fierce outbreak of predatory impulses. In a word, war will accompany the effort to manage global warming under capitalism, the degree to which this is to be military or economic being irrelevant for present purposes. And in this world of heightened chaos, war will do what it always does—sow ecological ruin and political authoritarianism. This is exactly what has been transpiring in the Middle East (and increasingly throughout Africa), and there is no way out of it within the present system. A corollary is the annihilation of even that minimally rational deliberative moment required for the implementation of the protocols set forth by the IPCC.

Science Wars

Taken as a whole, the IPCC report represents an uneasy marriage between two strands of science—the arcane discourse of comprehending the motion of global climate across time and into the future, and standing over this, the aptly-named “dismal” science of economics. Economics stands over climate science insofar as it is the prime science of the ruling capitalist classes who control the state and the

scientific establishment. The whole of modern industrial capital is inextricably wound up with the course of science, and so control over science is an absolute condition for accumulation. Therefore scientists today are bought and sold in the marketplace. They develop in tightly structured environments shot through with patronage, hierarchy and the tentacles of state and corporate power. Isolated geniuses like Newton or Einstein sailing alone through seas of thought before releasing their findings to an astonished world will never be found again in a mature capitalism. Nowadays the world has its imprint on every scientific product through each stage of its making, and theories are born branded, with patents attached. Science has become a practice by committee; and the IPCC, swollen with authority, is the Committee-in-Chief of the climate science establishment.

Given the record of organized science, this should alert the critical imagination to radically question the IPCC and its findings. Bourgeois economics is born corrupt. It seeks to justify the regime of private property and money, and it is bound to corrupt whatever it controls by fixing the results in a form convenient to the ruling classes. But this does not reduce the findings of climate science to whatever ideology demands, if only because such would not be convenient to the capitalist elites. The scientifically attuned bourgeoisie cannot afford to disregard the actual contours of nature, whether in making a mobile phone, devising an anti-cancer drug, or, in this case, picking one's way through the intricacies of global climate change. However, nature's actual contours are not so easily discerned, either as an object of investigation or in the production of discourses—in the present case, the discourse of what is to come in the sphere of climate change. There is a large gray interpretative area and an irreducible uncertainty within which the presence of class interest looms to shift the argument in the way of capital.

But this does not imply the wholesale rejection of climate science, such as has been undertaken by the eminent left journalist Alexander Cockburn in a series of articles released earlier this year. A number of lessons can be learned from the ensuing debate. The foremost of these is that anybody who has not dedicated years to mastering the intricacies of climate science and its internal debates is not competent to judge on the question of climate change. Let me qualify: nobody is *fully* qualified to judge on climate science, climate scientists included, because the phenomena it subtends are too incompletely understood, vast, intricate, and non-linear for human comprehension. Climate scientists, on the other hand, are potentially competent to say something of use on the subject, having proved their *bona fides* by years of painstaking effort to appropriate the collective human endeavor to understand climate. The rest of us are not competent in an immediate sense: that includes myself, and the great majority of readers of this column. And it most definitely includes Cockburn, who is more incompetent than the rest of us, because he is so arrogant as to think himself competent. One can demolish Cockburn's arguments by pointing to the way he cherry-picks the findings that suit his prejudices, or the loose way he uses various "experts" who support his views—a number of whom are proven whores to big business, and in one instance, even a follower of Lyndon LaRouche—or by his refusal to give adequate documentation (these points having been usefully made by George Monbiot in an extended riposte to Cockburn). But the game is already given away by Cockburn's style, in which instead of patiently building an argument, he uses

vitriolic rhetoric to thrash about attacking those who disagree with him. Thus for all his gifts, Cockburn lacks the essential quality of judgment, which begins with an appreciation of self-limitation and is necessary if one is to be taken seriously in matters of this sort.

The citizen who wishes to evaluate the claims of climate science neither blindly follows nor rejects the experts, but educates oneself to learn from them. In brief, we need criteria of plausibility. The collective character of science no doubt dulls its edge but is not an unmitigated evil: what it imposes by constricting the individual imagination, it balances with the corrective of collective judgment against cranks and frauds. Thus Monbiot properly tasks Cockburn with failing to honor the criterion of peer review in assessing his sources. But this criterion must be employed critically, by evaluating the community of peers according to their relation to the forces of accumulation and the capitalist state.

The criterion is all too easy to apply to the global warming debate, where climate scientists who support the greenhouse gas hypothesis have been excluded from policy positions within the Bush administration and/or replaced by people who move on a revolving door between the state and oil giants like ExxonMobil. It is remarkable how minimization of global warming or downright skeptical hostility to its implications correlates with class position of capital—excepting Alex Cockburn, of course, where it seems to manifest an unfortunate personal idiosyncrasy. In any event, we should recognize that associations of climate scientists who stand against petroculture—whether or not politically elaborated is not at issue—are to be accorded the greater plausibility. Nor should it come as a shock to learn that it is these who consistently support the argument that global warming is real, and that it is driven primarily by industrial effusions and veering rapidly toward catastrophic nonlinear feedback loops.

Said scientists need not take up the implication that the chain of causation extends into the cancerous system of capital—though of course there is nothing stopping them from doing so as individuals, as indeed is the case for all of us. Nothing extrinsic, that is. For most are stopped by “mind-forg’d manacles” of fear and deadly, comfortable torpor, stopped from seeing that the predicament of the planet and all that live upon it demands a revolutionary response to the common crisis. This is not the place to spell out how the system impedes coming to grips with its own ecodestructiveness. It needs be mentioned, however, that the insights of people like George Monbiot and Al Gore have to be criticized for pointing the way toward what needs to be done about global warming while failing to give vision into the political measures that need to be taken if we are to escape the trap set by the dominant way of production.

Nonetheless, the interwoven processes revealed here, between the oncoming planetary catastrophe and the gross inadequacy of established power for dealing adequately with it, may illuminate what is both immediately a necessity and a possibility: that all effort must be given to building an ecocentric society beyond capital, a free society in harmony with nature. There are no blueprints at hand for this, but the time for turning in its direction is now. And the signpost of this turn is

the word, *ecosocialism*. Happily, a meeting is afoot to bring this notion further into the world, to be held in Paris, in the month of October of this year. The reader may learn more of this on our website: <http://www.CNSjournal.org/>. All who want to transform the world in an ecosocialist way are welcome.

—Joel Kovel