

Appropriate Technocracies? Green Capitalist Discourses and Post Capitalist Desires

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With each passing day, the accumulating evidence of our near certain ecosystemic decline becomes harder and harder to ignore. Coupled with a profoundly inertial response to these trends, capitalist societies are proving themselves to be thoroughly incapable of preventing our collective self-annihilation. All of the earnest, well-intentioned sentiment, all of the scientific alarm, all of the expressed desire—and will—to make the world a better place, amounts to very little, very late. While we may see traces, as Erik Swyngedouw argues, of a post-political condition where apocalypse is endlessly forestalled, presented as something we can still avoid through techno-managerial control, James McCarthy reminds us that for many people on this planet, the apocalypse has already arrived.

That said, all is not apocalyptic. Over the past year, there's been an inspiring upswell of popular insurgency, from Egypt to Oakland, Arab Spring to Occupy, which has reignited a sense that we can and will form new collective subjectivities that are actually capable of making a better world. Despite the overwhelmingly grim prognoses of climate destabilization, there is something emerging—a “structure of feeling”—that is decidedly not post-political, and has not resigned itself to the managerial control of capital markets and technocratic elites. In my contribution to this symposium, I would like to push back against the idea that we are “in” a post-political condition. Just as Swyngedouw critiques the post-political consensus for naturalizing capitalist social relations, we must avoid naturalizing the post-political as an unwavering cultural truth or unavoidable political condition.

To make this case, I want to focus specifically on mass market texts in the U.S. that advocate, in one form or another, for a variety of “green” capitalisms—proposals that will, their authors insist, save our collective, planetary selves without having to eschew the cherished free market system. The very idea of green capitalism is too often summarily rejected by critical scholars as a contradiction in terms—at best a naïve instance of false consciousness, at worst a diabolical ideological veneer allowing business as usual to continue apace. Instead, what if we explored these contradictions, not as a sign of conceptual failure, but as constitutive elements of a generative and imaginative popular discourse? Swyngedouw (2010, 228) gestures towards the need for “great new fictions that create real possibilities for constructing different socio-environmental futures.” What I want to suggest is that many of these new narratives, or at least many powerful pieces of such narratives, are being developed in and through the very discourses that might easily, or superficially, be disregarded as post-political legitimizations of capitalism as we know it.

With this essay, I distinguish two divergent—even if often times overlapping—tendencies within this genre. The first advocates for a Green New Deal: massive state-led development to provide infrastructural support for a greener, cleaner economy. The second envisions an altogether new green economy. In relation to Green New Deal arguments, more attention to a critique of the post-political is necessary. Yet, in relation to visions of a

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new economy, a critique of the post-political can actually blind us to important and imaginative ideas that are worth engaging, especially if we are committed to developing a popular and popularly radical environmentalism.

A Green New Deal and the Post-political Condition

Swyngedouw defines the post-political condition as a managerial consensus sustained by apocalyptic fears, where technocrats and scientists are presumed to know what's good for all of us. This lends itself to a populism that pits an undifferentiated humanity against a common, reified foe, in this case carbon disequilibrium, and conceives of this struggle within a framework that naturalizes the capitalist economy. At the heart of this post-political malaise is the self-assured mantra, most infamously associated with Margaret Thatcher, that there is no alternative, TINA for short.

Climate change politics have become a prominent marker of this post-political ascent, colonizing spaces of political activity with a depoliticized state of nature best left to technocratic control. Climate science crosses over from necessary information into fetishized and desensitizing spectacle, with litanies of scientific facts that detail our planetary ecosystem's decline projecting out towards grim apocalyptic scenarios of a world completely out of balance. This leads to demands that at every scale, human civilization must become more "sustainable" or "environmentally friendly" and that well-informed experts, entrepreneurs, and politicians can and must lead the way while the rest of us dutifully press our leaders to lead, our governments to govern. This often results in banal forms of greenwashing that legitimize the maintenance of business as usual, and gives rise, Swyngedouw argues (2010, 219), to a "thoroughly depoliticized imaginary."¹

Many of these traits can be found in the green capitalism literature, often expressed in and through desires for massive state-led developments, or what is often referred to as a Green New Deal. Numerous proposals explain how massive state-led investment will provide jobs, distribute wealth, and dematerialize the economy through energy-efficient infrastructure and technology. Lester Brown's *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization* (2008) argues for a "WWII-scale mobilization" for global redevelopment for which he has calculated the hundreds of billions of US\$ (modest in respect to our current, financialized economy) necessary to enact his proposed portfolio of energy-efficient technologies. In *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* (2008), Thomas Friedman advocates for the U.S. to emulate China—just for one day—because we need government to provide a rational and far-reaching development plan focused on nurturing an innovation-based economy. Moving further to the left, Bill McKibben in his recent book *Eaarth* (2010) tells us that he fully supports such massive state-led projects, even while focusing on a more local, distributed model for a better economy. Even Christian Parenti, an unlikely contributor to the genre, argues in *Tropic of Chaos* (2012, 241) that although capitalism may be an enemy of nature, "either capitalism solves the crisis, or it destroys civilization." In an article in *The Nation* titled "Why Climate Change will Make You Love Big Government" (January 26, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/165885/why-climate-change-will-make-you-love-big-government>), he suggests that addressing the climate crisis "will require a relegitimation of

¹ A related argument can be made about the use of apocalyptic narratives by critical scholars (Katz, 1993).

the state's role in the economy," and we must therefore "make the effort to force our political leaders to act."

To adapt to climate change will mean coming together on a large scale and mobilizing society's full range of resources. In other words, Big Storms require Big Government. Who else will save stranded climate refugees, or protect and rebuild infrastructure, or coordinate rescue efforts and plan out the flow and allocation of resources? It will be government that does these tasks, or they will not be done at all.

For Parenti, as well as Brown, Freidman, and others writing in this vein, the potential for government to "go big" and address our planetary problems becomes a pragmatic call for immediate solutions within the existing social, economic, and political relations. Here I should be clear: there is no question that disaster relief and public infrastructure are crucial to our collective lives. Further, there is nothing wrong with pragmatism, or for that matter with attempting to rework existing social and political infrastructure towards the production of more ecologically viable and socially just futures. However, there is a crucial distinction that needs to be made between reworking the state and merely re-loading it. Calls for a Green New Deal tend to focus on the latter: more investment, more jobs, more infrastructure, without ever really pausing to question whether this will merely resuscitate the very social, technological, economic and political system that is responsible for accelerating (or possibly even causing) our planetary problems.

This exposes a more general problem facing the Left today. When "neoliberalism" displaces "capitalism" as our object of critique, it can be easy to romanticize prior forms of capitalist administration, such as the Progressive Era's municipal improvements or the Keynesian welfare (and warfare) state of the early 20th century, and to forget that most of the ecological and social crises that we currently face were produced by these seemingly less-worse regimes of accumulation. To take one example: the Progressive Era laid the groundwork for a sophisticated waste management system that dramatically improved the health and sanitation of public spaces. And yet, this same system was quite possibly the single most important piece of a techno-cultural infrastructure that has allowed for the subsequent rise of rampant disposability and planned obsolescence, which requires no-longer desired commodities to be whisked away, out of site, out of mind.

So long as nothing fundamentally changes in our socio-economic relations to one another and to the non-human world, then even the most beneficial of "clean technologies," whether developed at the government's expense or through private markets, will have scant impact on our rapidly destabilizing ecosystem, and may even serve to further entrench us on our path towards inconceivably devastating climate crisis. For these reasons, there is every reason to be suspect of any calls for re-loading capitalism with a Green New Deal. Again, this is not to argue against the possibility of massive infrastructural transformations—technologically, socially, culturally, economically—it is simply to suggest that we may need to articulate these sorts of desires for large-scale, coordinated solutions without falling back upon calls for a progressive green capitalism or a Green New Deal.

Other Possible Economies?

Not only are alternative visions possible, but we may even find their insipient expression within this same body of work. From the now classic *Natural Capitalism* (Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins 1999) to more recent works such as Peter Barnes' *Capitalism 3.0* (2006), and John Michael Greer's *The Wealth of Nature* (2011), there are now a wide range of proposals for large-scale, fundamental transformations of the capitalist economy incubating in our cultural landscape. The majority of these texts ruthlessly critique industrial capitalism—the waste and excess of a century of overproduction and overconsumption, of financial swindles and corporate domination, of legions of lobbyists and decades of unregulated pollution. They assuredly pronounce that actually existing capitalism, or “business as usual” can no longer continue apace.

The parallels with ecological modernization theory are hard to miss. These texts imagine a post-industrial capitalism that has moved beyond the negative traits of the past century (excess, disposability, speculation, etc.) while holding on to the virtuous traits that have allowed modernity to flourish (individual freedom, innovation, production, etc.). Yet despite proposing solutions such as “green capitalism,” “climate capitalism,” “natural capitalism,” or “Capitalism 3.0,” many of the texts offering proposals for a green economy are passionately committed to superseding the present economic state of affairs, and even arrive at some imaginative non-capitalist possibilities that directly contradict their otherwise pro-capitalist, legitimizing discourse.

Here is where I hope to push back against Swyngedouw's conception of the post-political. In most cases, a welter of earnestly political aspirations lies just under the surface of otherwise post-political discourses grappling with the operationalization of becoming environmentally friendly, or “going green.” And so, while they may explicitly call for a post-industrial capitalism, the affective force undergirding their rhetoric stems from imagining possibilities that are, or could only be, realized as an industrial post-capitalism. Fully excavating the liberatory and utopian visions coursing through this new “green” spirit of capitalism is a much larger project than this brief essay will allow, but I can provide a few illustrative examples.

An attack on corporate power, specifically the power of large energy and extraction companies, leads to some strongly worded proposals to reclaim control over social production from large corporations. For instance, Peter Barnes, in *Capitalism 3.0*, advocates for the creation of a commons sector of the economy that would repossess all of the wealth that can and should be held in common—from land, resources and biodiversity to culture, intellectual property, and even market liquidity.² This commons sector—functioning as a trust with ethical, as opposed to fiduciary, responsibility—would then force the corporate world to pay for access that the commons sector deemed acceptable. Alternately, Gustave Speth (2008, 173) argues for nothing short of a revolution against for-profit corporate control: “[W]e must dramatically change the publicly traded, limited liability global corporation, just as previous generations set out to eliminate or control the monarchy.” He envisions a new economy dominated by corporations whose sole aim is to serve the public

² Market liquidity? This observation is quite brilliant—Barnes essentially flips the script on consumer sovereignty, shifting its focus from an ideology of personal choice to one of constitutive power: without consumers, in aggregate, there is no market, hence by his reckoning, the “sovereignty” of consumers becomes a collective authority.

good in terms of “sustainability, equity, participation and respect for the rights of human beings” while being governed by the public, as opposed to boards of directors, in a transparent, democratic process (182).

Of course we could easily read these same texts as thoroughly post-political. Speth and Barnes both explicitly distance themselves from the redistributive implications of their proposals, and artfully shift their seemingly anti-systemic discourses into more tempered social democratic proposals for capitalism with a friendly face. Accordingly, Speth’s suggestions reverberate through the discourses of corporate social responsibility, where fantasy serves more to insulate from change than to promote any.

There are a number of other examples to be drawn on as well—in each case a truly emancipatory vision overlays with a recuperative legitimization of business as usual. Janine Benyus’ *Biomimicry* (1997) (as well as the eco-design classic, *Cradle to Cradle* [McDonough and Braungart 2002]) offer visions of a post-humanist techno-social engagement with social production. Benyus explicitly rejects the lineage of Bacon and the scientific domination of nature in favor of a paradigm that looks to model human production upon non-human forms, as opposed to the other way around. She asks us to extend our vision of possible democracies past the confines of an anthropocentric world view, proposing instead a democratized ecosystem in which all agents—human and non-human alike—are able to come together in a “parliament of species.” While Benyus asks us to undo the alienation between humans and the non-human world, many other proposals focus instead upon undoing the alienation between producer and product. Proposals for a service-based economy in *Natural Capitalism*, or a Slow Money (2010) economy from Woody Tasch’s book by that name (2008), each envision another possible economy in which the alienation of work has been undone; where producers and consumers have an ongoing relationship that is defined by mutual recognition and that privileges the quality, durability, and maintenance of that which is produced.

Again, these proposals are not without problems. The service economy model presented in *Natural Capitalism* and repurposed in numerous subsequent texts relies on a complete misunderstanding of capitalist circulation or the ways profit is created through the very parts of the economy—sales and marketing—that they hope to circumvent. Tasch’s slow money economy is ultimately an elite enclave where the wealthy are served materially and affectively by artisanal producers. As for Benyus, her parliament of species is about as democratic as the current U.S. electoral system.

My point is simply this: while green capitalist texts certainly provide vulgar legitimization of business as usual, they may also hold within them real expressions of post-capitalist ambitions that are important to identify and explore. We can read such reformist proposals as a naïve call for the capitalist state and economy to be something it cannot be, or we can read them as a profound call for this actually existing set of relations to be superseded by a new form of collective coordination, one that actually serves the public whose lives it administers, as opposed to the narrow interests of capital. Similarly, we might ask: Do these authors simply hope that capital will save the day? Or is it that they have placed their faith in the accumulated power of collaborative social production that capital has hoarded into an apparent monopoly? While it is important to acknowledge the post-political tenor of mainstream environmentalism, to reduce all climate politics to this one

trajectory would seem to have the unintended consequence of buttressing the very post-political (social) scientific consensus-making that has been named as “our” collective problem. In other words, to apply to the current state of climate politics the blanket label “post-political” is, ironically, a decidedly post-political gesture.

And so my question—an open question still waiting to be answered by a history yet to unfold—is: how will these green capitalist texts be articulated within a populism that is decidedly less post-political than Swyngedouw presents?

Radical Subjects

Building a radical environmental subjectivity, a popular and popularly radical environmentalism, may need to engage with the discourses and desires reflected in calls for green capitalism. We must be able to rework these discourses from within, helping steer readers away from these texts’ most recuperative implications, while recognizing, respecting and amplifying the radical, liberatory aspirations that likely drew readers into these texts in the first place. This process is messy, to say the least, which leads to my final point, which I will open with a small vignette:

It can be easy to paint a portrait of the Occupy Wall Street movement as a relatively coherent anti-capitalist social movement, yet the reality of this conjuncture is decidedly more complicated. A strange brew of politics percolated through Zuccotti Park (the node of this movement that I happen to have had the most direct contact with), from Libertarian conspiracy theories and ardent Ron Paul supporters to anarchists, permaculturists, liberal Democrats, and a whole spectrum of less defined perspectives, each offering a unique take on the possibilities inherent in our political moment.

The OWS Library in Zuccotti Park reflected this diversity. Over the term of the occupation, it grew from one row of books along a marble embankment to a small bookstore’s worth of material; plastic bins housing various sections: “non fiction” “politics” “poetry” etc. The library wasn’t quite a library. There were no clear lending policies, and the collection was entirely dependent on whatever people decided to bring down to the park. Nor was it a free store, where you simply took whatever you’d like. It was somewhere in between, and something altogether different. The Library got a lot of attention for being indiscriminately tossed in a dumpster by Bloomberg during the clearing of the occupation. With this transgression, it became clear that the library symbolized, in material form, Occupy Wall Street’s general intellect. Bloomberg was not simply trashing a pile of books; he was discarding the materially embodied form of the movement’s capacity to think, do, and make for itself.

So what sort of material did this ephemeral archive hold? One night, I was browsing and came across the bin for “environment and sustainability.” The bin was a little light, there were only four books in it. I opened one, called *Strategies for the Green Economy* by Joel Makower (2008). Hand written inside the cover was the following dedication:

To occupy Wall Street, From my library to yours. Thank you for representing me. I am working for you at a cleantech company. I am a Wall Street Broker turned Cleantech exec. “Doing well by doing good,” but doing good comes first.
I am the 99 percent.

How do we make sense of this? I cannot say I was shocked—I had just recently returned from research at a green capitalism conference in San Francisco, where a network of ecologically enlightened investors were convinced that they were building (investing in building... but what’s the difference?) the new economy that the Occupy movement wanted—even if the movement did not know yet that this is in fact what it wanted. A speaker proclaimed, and was met by thunderous applause, “We are the 1 percent of the 1 percent that stand with the 99 percent.” A bit less catchy than “I am the 99 percent,” but the sentiment seemed to resonate.

I am not interested in debating whether these sorts of “green capitalists” are or could really be part of the 99 percent. Instead, I simply want to identify the confluence of real desires to see the world fundamentally change, and real desires to remain in control of those changes. Whether occupiers or investors, boardrooms or general assemblies, each positions themselves as the appropriate technocracy, best situated to address the global imbalances caused by an out-of-control economy. And so, in regards to critical, left opposition to bourgeois sustainability—my suggestion is not that we cease to ruthlessly interrogate and reveal its most spurious claims, but that we also consider how and in what ways it is possible to tap into its imaginative potential, its real hopes and desires for a world better than any capital could provide.

Ironically, green capitalist texts represent some of the most anti-capitalist perspectives currently circulating within a broadly popular discourse. Rejecting them outright because they fail to understand the essence of capitalism is not a good option. There are some interesting parallels between this green capitalist discourse and the popular radicalism of the early 19th century, a period of political work that Marx and Marxists often disregard as misguided petty bourgeois utopianism. These Marxist critiques are important, and resonate with many of the same present day concerns that Swyngedouw has with the post-political. Yet there is also a more nuanced story to tell. E.P. Thompson (1966) for instance, shows that despite their often patronizing tenor, spurious critique and crude economic analysis, the work of utopian socialists such as William Cobbet and Robert Owen played an important role in the making of a radical, militant, and self-conscious working class. While this sort of work may not have provided an adequate critique of capital, it did offer something else, what Thompson describes as “ideological raw material diffused among working people, and worked up by them into different products” (789). As Thompson explains:

Owenism from the late Twenties onwards, was a very different thing from the writings and proclamations of Robert Owen. It was the very imprecision of his theories, which offered, none the less, an image of an alternative system of society, and which made them adaptable to different groups of working people (789).

Utopian visions, then and now, serve as a repository of the impossible, a place for dreams to percolate and mature, in common. As Frederic Jameson cautions (2004, 36), “this clearly does not mean that, even if we succeed in reviving utopia itself, the outlines of a new and effective practical politics for the era of globalization will at once become visible; but

only that we will never come to one without it.” Instead of focusing on the persistent post-political calls demanding that our technocratic leaders lead, we can instead focus on the rather thought out—even if at times naïvely utopian—prescriptions as to how and in what way this leadership should be oriented. What if, through the process of making such demands heard, we come to find that there are no technocratic leaders “out there” capable of realizing our dreams, but that in fact, we ourselves are the only leaders worth following?

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