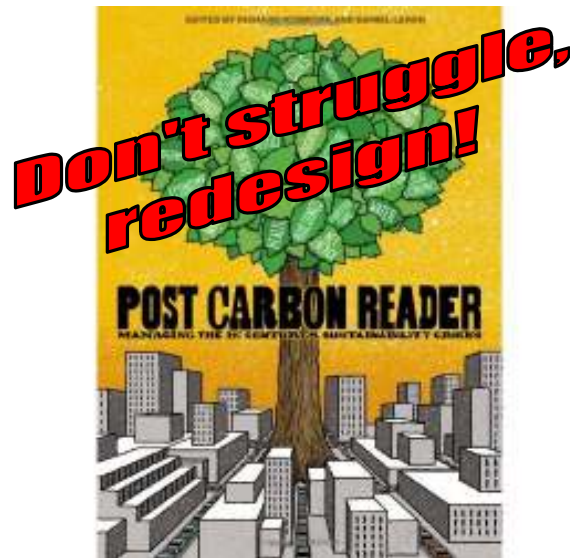


Post Carbon Institute: Blind to capitalism and power

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Historian E.P. Thompson tells us that industrialization was imposed on English workers through immense violence - both physical and mental. The physical violence was plain enough: “The commercial expansion, the enclosure movement, the early years of the Industrial Revolution - all took place within the shadow of the gallows.”¹ The mental violence, although harder to see, was almost as devastating. One conservative commentator advised the mill-owner to attend to the “moral machinery” of his workers, “...for otherwise he will never command the steady hands, watchful eyes, and prompt cooperation, essential to excellence of product...”² This advice was avidly followed: “Methodist preachers perfected techniques to arouse paroxysms of fear Children, from the age that they could speak, were terrified with images of everlasting punishment for the slightest misbehavior.”³ Thompson leaves no doubt about the nature of this violence: it was a class war, with powerful property owners crushing vulnerable workers in a burgeoning capitalist system.

The reason to revisit this brutal period is to point out that violence, struggle, class, power, and capitalism are virtually absent from the recently published *Post Carbon Reader*,⁴ a volume of essays about sustainability from Post Carbon Institute.⁵ The *Reader's* authors would have us believe that industrialism, which was drenched in blood and infused with terror on its entrance to

history, can now be placidly redesigned so as to mitigate its calamitous environmental impacts. This message falsifies the past and mystifies the present, making it impossible to formulate a workable strategy to address the ecological crisis. Because the stakes are so high, the Institute's errors must be clearly identified, and the organization must be exposed as an unfit leader for the environmental battles to come.

Post Carbon Institute (PCI) was formed in 2003 to help direct the shift to a "post-carbon world". According to its Manifesto, the Institute "... is dedicated to answering the central question of our times: *How do we manage the transition to a post-growth, post-fossil fuel, climate-changed world?*"⁶ The Manifesto acknowledges that many organizations in the "alternatives" movement are doing fine work, "*But what's lacking is a unified vision of both the challenges and solutions that sees all of these fields as interrelated.*"⁷ PCI thus sees itself as a strategic leader within the broad sustainability initiative.

PCI is strongly associated with the Transition movement, which seeks to build community resilience, and with ecological economics, an academic field of study that aims for a steady-state economy. The *Reader* therefore includes essays by Transition founder Rob Hopkins and by ecological economists William Rees and Joshua Farley. Other contributors include Bill McKibben, Richard Douthwaite, David Orr, and Chris Martenson. PCI's senior member, and the *Reader's* co-editor, is Richard Heinberg. Heinberg has written several books on peak oil, of which the best known is probably *The Party's Over*.⁸ He has also produced more than 200 Museletters⁹ - essays on peak oil and related topics - since 1992, and has appeared in numerous videos and films. His new book, *The End of Growth*, is scheduled for release in July, 2011.

The *Post Carbon Reader* contains 34 contributions. Many of these offer standard environmental fare, similar to the essays in the Worldwatch Institute's annual *State of the World* publications. For my purpose, the most important essays are those in Part One: "Foundation Concepts". Two of these are by Heinberg and one is by Rees. Of particular significance is Heinberg's first essay, "Beyond the Limits to Growth".

What is immediately apparent is that Heinberg and Rees take great pains to avoid the word "capitalism". Although both have used this word in the past, here they employ a host of substitutes. A favorite for Heinberg is "industrial society". Other choices are "market economy"¹⁰, "modern market-driven society"¹¹, "techno-industrial society"¹², and "modern industrial society"¹³. This obfuscation is significant because capitalism is not just industry, markets, and technology, but also a specific class structure and set of social relations. If these elements are ignored, the opponents of transformative change will remain unidentified and the reality of capitalist power will remain hidden. Without this understanding, the sustainability movement will be unable to achieve real progress.

Glossing over capitalism's specific features has another grave consequence: it muddles the critical issue of economic growth. Because of its historical role and internal dynamics, a capitalist economy is compelled to grow. This implies that, except for crisis conditions, such an economy cannot achieve the steady-state, and it certainly cannot contract. Although Heinberg affirms the growth requirement for "our existing economic system,"¹⁴ he refuses to explicitly identify this system. This makes it impossible to evaluate his assertion that our economies must

be “reinvented”¹⁵ because growth is ending. Does this mean that capitalism must be modified, that it must be historically superseded, or does it mean something else entirely? When an essential reality like capitalism is mystified, the result is ... a mystery.

Another term that Heinberg has used sporadically in the past, but avoids in his *Reader* essays, is “overshoot” - humankind’s violation of the planet’s overall environmental limits. This evades the central fact about our ecological predicament, which is that overshoot is the disease to be cured, whereas peak oil, climate change, habitat destruction, etc. are symptoms to be treated. In his book *Powerdown* Heinberg himself made this point when he said that fossil fuel depletion is “symptomatic of a universal ecological dilemma”¹⁶. Despite this past acknowledgment, he sidesteps the overshoot concept here, presumably because it focuses attention on the system as a whole, which could bring us uncomfortably close to the recognition of capitalism and its destructive role. Thus, as Heinberg winds up his core *Reader* essay, he introduces us not to the post-overshoot transition, but to the post-carbon transition. This narrowing of the target allows him and his fellow PCI members to focus on energy and other subsystems rather than the real target: the economic system itself.

The extreme political weakness of Heinberg’s analysis is indicated by his repeated misuse of the pronoun “we”. There is nothing wrong with this word in broad reference to the ecological predicament of the human species. It is true that humankind as a whole - “we” - must shift from an expansionary to a contractionary trajectory. However, the word is inappropriate when discussing the cause of our predicament. As noted in my opening paragraph, industrialization was not a communal project, but was imposed on an unwilling populace. And the use of “we” is not just inappropriate, but strategically fatal, when applied to solutions. Even if you dismiss E.P. Thompson’s claim that capitalists used force to initiate industrial growth two centuries ago, you would be guilty of extraordinary naivety if you believe that they will not use force to maintain industrial growth now. To move our species onto a sustainable path, the contractionary members of our species will have to struggle politically against its expansionary members. Sadly but emphatically, the road to sustainable well-being is paved with conflict and strife.

Heinberg’s political posture is based on a profound error that appeared in *The Party’s Over*:

“In order for the movement to meet the challenges of the post-petroleum era, it must discard all socioeconomic analysis rooted in the 19th century (e.g., classical Marxism and some strains of anarchism), which assumes industrial growth based on increasing energy-resource availability. The analysis needed today must take into account ecological principles, energy-resource constraints, population pressure, and the historical dynamics of complex societies ...”¹⁷

Here he begins correctly by criticizing Marxism on ecological grounds. However, note what he does next: instead of *adding* ecological considerations to an analysis that takes class and power into account, he *replaces* this analysis with ecological considerations alone. That is, he doesn’t try to correct a social perspective that is based on expansionary assumptions, he jettisons the social perspective itself. This blunder, which is usually called ecological reductionism, is Heinberg’s original sin. Once this is in place, his other mistakes inevitably follow.

Heinberg's political weakness is puzzling because of his brave and longstanding opposition to the official story about 9/11. Many progressives, such as Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky, uncritically accept the official version of these events. Heinberg, on the other hand, has researched them thoroughly and has concluded that, "... persons within the US government had clear foreknowledge of the attacks, and efforts to prevent those attacks were systematically thwarted on orders from higher levels."¹⁸ His view, which I largely share, is that 9/11 was a pretext to control some of the world's richest oil-producing regions in response to the looming peak oil crisis.¹⁹ Heinberg is also aware that those in power will resort to violence in defence of their privileges: he has stated that the US could become "a fascistic regime"²⁰ in response to resource constraints. I find it impossible to square these hard-nosed assessments with his pallid statement in the *Reader* that "What we need now are clarity, leadership, coordination, and collaboration."²¹ Which of these will prevent another 9/11 - or fascism?

It is important to understand that PCI and its *Reader* are not isolated initiatives. Instead, they are part of a broad reformist response to the ecological crisis. To any objective and informed mind, the main cause of overshoot is clear - it is the inexorable growth of the world's capitalist economies and their imitators in China. The conclusion inescapably follows: the system must now be historically superseded. As Bolivian president Evo Morales has said, "Either capitalism dies or Mother Earth dies".²² The reformist drive has arisen to thwart this conclusion - to divert our attention away from the necessary move beyond capitalism and towards the various ways that the system might be tweaked and thus retained.

Avoiding a conclusion that is practically staring us in the face is a tricky task, and several approaches have been developed to achieve it. For those who might seek to replace the conservative leadership of PCI and similar organizations, it is important to know what these approaches are. The most convenient way to sort them out is through a basic tool of logic - the syllogism. If you don't recall what this is, the standard example will likely refresh your memory:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Socrates is mortal.

The first two statements are the premises. These are claims about reality, and can be true or false. The last statement is the conclusion, which follows from the premises. In a properly structured syllogism, if the premises are true, the conclusion is true as well. This is the case above - Socrates drank the hemlock and proved that he was indeed mortal. The syllogism that concerns us here is the following:

Capitalist economies must grow.
Growth is unsustainable.
Capitalist economies must go.

The two premises are statements that I and many others believe to be true. The conclusion, which follows logically if the aim is sustainability, indicates that the system is no longer tenable, and that it must be replaced as soon as this is feasible.

One way to avoid this syllogism's conclusion is to deny its first premise - that is, to claim that capitalist economies are not destined to grow. Ecological economists use this approach when they insist that our economic system - which they reluctantly admit is capitalist - can move from growth to the steady-state. The field has, to the best of my knowledge, never attempted to substantiate this claim, or even to clearly state that this is their position. For the most part, discussions about capitalism are avoided, and adherents are conditioned to accept this deceptive stance. The only candor I have found on the subject comes from Tim Jackson, who is associated with ecological economics but is not a member of the clan. In his book *Prosperity without Growth* he says that, "... a capitalist economy doesn't after all inevitably have to be growth-based."²³ Jackson's statement is clumsy and imprecise, but that's about as good as it gets on this sensitive topic.

Another way to avert the conclusion is to deny the second premise - that is, to claim that continued growth is possible without destroying the environment. This stance can only be maintained through the magic of technology, so it's perfect for that great champion of American ingenuity, Thomas Friedman. In his book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Friedman talks openly about capitalism, asserts that growth is "a bedrock principle"²⁴, and takes the position that, "We have to have growth based as much as possible on clean fuels ... Give me abundant, clean, reliable, and cheap electrons, and I will give you a world that can continue to grow without triggering unmanageable climate change."²⁵ Needless to say, few environmental thinkers share Friedman's view, although a shocking number have lauded his growth-obsessed book.

There is a third way to avoid the conclusion that capitalism has become obsolete: accept both premises in relation to the current economic system, but deny that this system is capitalist. This is Heinberg's approach.²⁶ Because he is in many respects a reality-based analyst, Heinberg correctly asserts that our economy is based on growth and that this growth is unsustainable. However, because he evidently wants to salvage capitalism, he is left with no choice but to concoct an imaginative list of evasive terms. The word "capitalism" itself might expose the fact that the system has evolved historically to prevent contraction. Terms like "industrial society", "market economy", etc. abstract away from such realities, allowing him to pretend that contraction is possible within the prevailing order.

One of the reasons why Heinberg and others find it difficult to appraise our situation honestly is that they're trapped in a false dichotomy: the choice is either capitalism or socialism, and the latter is unacceptable for a variety of reasons. They fail to see that other possibilities exist. For example, I have developed a strategy²⁷ that negates capitalism's expansionism while permitting a rapid but organic shift to a new system. The strategy recognizes the need for political struggle against an entrenched capitalist class, but it avoids the errors that socialism has unquestionably made. The intended result is neither capitalism nor socialism, but a contractionary system that is moving towards sustainable well-being.

Exploring such strategies is important, but what is critical at this stage is to recognize that PCI's leadership is false and dangerous. The problem does not lie with the reforms they offer. Such modifications, which can enhance lives and improve the environment, are always welcome. The danger lies in their *reformism* - the insistence that reforms are all we should attempt, and that the historical supersession of capitalism is beyond our capacity. In effect, PCI is telling us, "Don't

struggle, redesign!” My suggested alternative is: “To redesign, struggle!” Until this shift is made and a more enlightened leadership steps forward, the capitalist rampage will continue, with ominous consequences for humankind and the biosphere.

Notes

¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 66.

² Thompson, *ibid.*, 397. The quote is from Andrew Ure’s *Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835).

³ Thompson, *ibid.*, 410.

⁴ Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch, editors, *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st Century’s Sustainability Crises* (Healdsburg, California: Watershed Media, 2010).

⁵ Website: <http://www.postcarbon.org>. Note that there is no “The” in front of PCI’s name. Also, there is no hyphen in “Post Carbon Institute” or “Post Carbon Reader”, although PCI hyphenates “post-carbon transition”, “post-carbon world”, etc.

⁶ <http://www.postcarbon.org/new-site-files/pdfs/PCI%20Manifesto.pdf>. Emphasis in original.

⁷ <http://www.postcarbon.org/new-site-files/pdfs/PCI%20Manifesto.pdf>. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Richard Heinberg, *The Party’s Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (New Society Publishers: Gabriola Island, Canada, 2003).

⁹ <http://richardheinberg.com/category/museletter>

¹⁰ *Post Carbon Reader*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Richard Heinberg, *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World* (New Society Publishers: Gabriola Island, Canada, 2004), 52.

¹⁷ Heinberg, *The Party’s Over*, 208f.

¹⁸ Heinberg, *Powerdown*, 70.

¹⁹ See the excellent video, “Oil, Smoke & Mirrors” (Ronan Doyle, 2006): <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8677389869548020370#> Heinberg’s comments on 9/11 start at 17:25. The comment about 9/11 being a “pretext” is at 19:45.

²⁰ “Oil, Smoke & Mirrors” at 45:25.

²¹ *Post Carbon Reader*, p. 12.

²² “Bolivia blames capitalism for ‘genocide’”, *Vancouver Sun*, December 10, 2010, B5.

²³ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Earthscan: London, 2009), 90.

²⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why we need a green revolution and how it can renew America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2008), 186.

²⁵ Friedman, *ibid.*, 186f.

²⁶ Note that ecological economists use the first method, but that Heinberg uses the third. The fact that both are represented within PCI reveals the Institute’s shaky theoretical foundations as well as its underlying intentions: it doesn’t matter how you stick with capitalism, so long as you do.

²⁷ The strategy is available on my website: needsandlimits.org (“Strategy” button). For an abbreviated version, see the YouTube video “Reversing Overshoot - A Strategy” at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMnFLHy4Vws>.