

Environmentalism and political struggle

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A year ago I produced a video¹ that discussed the limits of today's environmentalism. My main point was that the movement can be effective when it operates within capitalism's rules, but that it is incapable of offering solutions that would break these rules. I concluded that environmentalism, in its current form, "...cannot lead us to a steady-state or contracting economy. ... And it cannot shift the economy to sharply lower production based on needs or tempered wants."

The video was not one of my better efforts, and it received only a modest number of views. I quickly forgot about it and returned to my economics work and the development of my strategy.² Recently, however, something happened to revive my interest in the video's message. Ken Rose, from radio station KOWS in Occidental, California, asked me to join him for an interview. In researching Rose's past interviews³ I found two that particularly intrigued me. One was with longtime anti-globalization leader Jerry Mander; the other was with Bay-area activist Saba Malik.

Mander started out by acknowledging that the ecological crisis is rooted in capitalism, and that, "... we need to start talking about ... systemic change." He said that growth must not only stop, but that production in the rich countries must decline. When Rose blamed the populace for their lack of alarm about the ecological crisis, Mander disagreed. He insisted that information derives from those in control, and that the populace should not be blamed for their poor understanding. When he turned to solutions, Mander talked about governmental and corporate responsibilities. He urged people to work at the local level in order to build community solutions. He lauded the Transition movement, calling its initiatives "illuminating". When Rose questioned the effectiveness of this approach, Mander retorted that it was crippling to consider the effects. The important thing, he said, is to work daily at the local level, on the assumption that a critical mass of support will be achieved and that change will come "eventually, before it's too late".

Malik, after citing statistics about global inequality and ecological decline, also referred to our economic system: "It's stunning to me how capitalism has become a sacred cow

that no-one will attack in discourse.” She cited a “well-known environmentalist” who claimed that, because capitalism had decisively defeated socialism, the task at hand was to provide capitalism with an ethical framework. Malik’s terse comment was that, “A profit-based system can’t be ethical.” Rose rejected this combative stance: “... much of what needs to be happening is actually beginning to happen.” Malik’s response clearly exposed the difference between her and both Rose and Mander: “You say things are happening ... give me an example. Numerous organizations are doing lots of great work - permaculture, relocalization, etc. This is wonderful, and I’m involved in it. But everything measurable is going the wrong way. So whatever we’re doing is not working. ... Unless all this community work is linked with a broader political struggle, we’re not really going to get anywhere.”

As indicated in my video and strategy, I fully support Malik in this debate. Although much has been achieved in the way of environmental reforms and local resilience, the destruction of the biosphere is escalating, not abating. It has become blindingly obvious that asking governments to regulate more firmly and corporations to behave more sensibly is a lost cause. Many of us, being concerned progressives, can’t imagine that those in power would permit ecological collapse in order to safeguard their privileges. Don’t these people have children too? Well, imagine it. In the nightmare described by Edward Abbey in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* there are no children, and there is no future: “... the dynamo purred on, murmuring the basic message: Power ... profit ...prestige ... pleasure ... profit ... prestige ... pleasure ... power ...”⁴

Malik is right that a two-pronged movement is on the agenda: while existing work should continue, a serious political struggle must now begin. If the objection is raised that the traditional left has made a hash of politics, the answer is: this is a different type of struggle, to be conducted by mostly different people, and we can learn from the dogmatism and sectarianism of the past. If it is pointed out that capitalism is an impolite topic, causing raised eyebrows and indigestion, the answer is: so were condoms and homosexuality at one time. Show some courage!

What is unclear to me is the possible linkage between the worlds of Jerry Mander and Saba Malik. Can this be a unified movement with two different modes of action, or will the political side be forced to tread an independent path? What I find discouraging about the Mander side is its categorical rejection of political struggle in addressing the overshoot crisis. Despite ample evidence of a biosphere at the cusp, it remains fervently committed to local activities and reforms. How did this one-sidedness arise? Is it simply a disgusted reaction to past failures, or is it something deeper? As a non-activist, I am unable to answer these questions.

I am also unable to determine how many activists are on Malik’s side. Her statement to Rose was that, “This perspective is growing in the movement. There are more and more people who feel like I do ... that political resistance is absolutely necessary if we’re going

to have any future on this planet.” Is this assessment accurate? If so, what numbers are we talking about, and what is the rate of conversion from the Mander to the Malik camp? The answers to these questions will determine when the idea of political struggle can assume organizational form, thereby initiating the battle to supersede capitalism, reverse overshoot, and achieve sustainable well-being.

If you have useful knowledge or insights, or if you support political struggle and would like to explore organizational possibilities, please contact me: frank_rotoring [at] yahoo.com.

¹ “Reorienting Environmentalism”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJRA0F7VEfA>

² For my economics, see the book *Needs and Limits* at needsandlimits.org. For my strategy, see: <http://www.energybulletin.net/stories/2010-11-20/strategy-reverse-overshoot-and-achieve-sustainable-well-being>

³ The list is long and impressive - see <http://www.pantedmonkey.org/>. The Jerry Mander interview is dated 11-23-09. The Saba Malik interview is dated 12-29-09. A second Malik interview, dated 03-01-10, is ignored here.

⁴ Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), 256.