

2010

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**Harry Powell**

**REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS**

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It is now generally accepted that humanity faces very serious *environmental problems*. The ones most frequently mentioned are:

- **Climate change** – especially as brought about by the burning of fossil fuels generating greenhouse gases.
- **Energy supplies** – meeting present and future needs in sustainable ways.
- **Habitat and species destruction** – involving pollution, waste, resource depletion and intensive farming.
- **Population growth** – including urban growth and transport.

All of these phenomena are interrelated in complex ways and each one can be practically dealt with not in isolation but only by taking the whole totality into account. The principal aspect of this contradictory complex has come to be identified as *climate change* caused by increases in the atmosphere of so-called *greenhouse gases*, especially carbon dioxide, which is bringing about *global warming*.

During the last twenty years or so there has been a growing recognition that these are very serious, real problems which can be tackled only by concerted, large-scale actions. Even President George W. Bush changed his tune from dismissing this issue to a grudging acceptance that action at the national and international levels is necessary. His successor Barack Obama is quite clear that this is a major issue. There are still a few climate change deniers, such as the former Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson, but evidence against them is now overwhelming. Very few scientists who study these phenomena seriously question that climate change is occurring on a significant scale. Only extreme neo-liberals still claim that the normal functioning of the capitalist market will

automatically deal with these problems. National governments and international bodies such as the United Nations are trying to agree on and enforce policies to tackle these environmental issues, e.g. the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, but with limited success. The modest targets it set for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases were not met, (especially because the major greenhouse gas emitter, the USA, refused to sign it), and the Copenhagen Conference in 2009 failed to reach a binding international agreement to reduce emissions to a level that might prevent the average temperature of the planet from rising by more than two degrees centigrade during this century.

### WHAT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM?

The evidence strongly suggests that it is *human actions* rather than *natural processes*, acting independently of human intervention, which are the main cause of global warming. The climate change deniers point out that the planet has a long history of atmospheric warming and cooling. However the rise in average global temperature during the last two hundred years has been very rapid and is strongly associated with the increase in greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels such as coal and oil. Furthermore the massive amounts of deforestation, desertification, resource depletion and pollution have clearly been brought about by human agency. Obviously the problem here is one of human behaviour and can only be dealt with by bringing about large scale changes in our collective life.

Some people claim that it is human *avarice*, a very strong desire to possess and consume ever greater quantities of material goods; which is the fundamental problem. People

always want more, they say. The mainstream of modern economic theory claims that human wants are insatiable and its analyses and policy recommendations are based upon this assumption. This sort of thinking often leads on to moralizing exhortations to us as individuals not to be so greedy. There is the implication that we are afflicted by an original sin against which we must struggle to overcome on an individual basis. One obvious objection to this claim about human psychology is the fact that in the economically developed countries massive amounts of money are spent by manufacturers on advertising to try to persuade us to consume ever more goods and services. If our wants were really insatiable then this large commitment of human and material resources to advertising would be unnecessary. In the last fifty years in Britain the consumption per head of goods and services has increased several times and yet psychological studies show that people's general sense of wellbeing has not increased. Clearly this crude theory of avarice is an inadequate explanation of the basic cause of our environmental problems.

Another contentious view is the claim that there are simply too many people on the planet, that there are not enough natural resources to sustain everybody at a reasonable standard of living. This is a reassertion of the analysis put forward by Thomas Malthus two hundred years ago. He claimed that population increases would inevitably outstrip increases in the output of goods and services necessary to provide for a growing population. In fact this has not happened although there are great material inequalities between people on a world scale and much absolute material deprivation. Malthus overlooked the fact that people are producers as well as consumers and that scientific and technological advances have brought about great increases in output per head. Even so it is probably true that the material resources of the planet are insufficient for all



of the world's population to have the sort of material standard of living enjoyed by the minority of the world's population in the developed countries. However, as argued above, a lot of the consumables which have come to be seen as essential in these countries do not in fact promote real well-being and we could easily do without them. We need to produce not more but *different*. To see the human population as the principal environmental problem leads on to genocidal views where mass death brought about by starvation and war are welcomed. The problem is not that there are too many people but rather that there are too many *exploiters*.

### CAPITALISM IS THE PROBLEM

So what is the fundamental, underlying cause of this major threat to the human species? It is the continuing existence of *capitalism*, the predominant economic and social system in the world today. Modern capitalism emerged out of feudalism beginning in Europe about seven hundred years ago but it really took off with the development of modern industry from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. It is much more dynamic than earlier social systems, especially in its development of science and technology and their application to economic activity, and brings about much more rapid economic and social change. Writing in 1848 in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels stated:

"The bourgeoisie (*capitalist class*), during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole

continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?"

and:

"Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones."

Capitalism has transformed the modern world beyond recognition. It has created enormous material wealth and paradoxically at the same time enormous poverty. In sheer numbers there are more absolutely poor people in the world than ever before. The aim of capitalist economic activity is to maximize *money profits* and not to maximize the satisfaction of *human needs*. The mainstream of modern economic theory – *bourgeois economics* – claims that aiming to make money profits also is the best way to maximize the satisfaction of human needs. That, as a matter of fact, this is obviously not the case is demonstrated by the current economic recession. The drive by finance capital to maximize profits has resulted in millions of people around the world losing their homes and jobs.

Another claim made by apologists for capitalism is that it functions so as to produce goods and services, *commodities*, very efficiently at minimum cost. In fact many of the costs of production are not borne by the individual capitalist firm. There are *external costs* which do not appear in the balance sheets of firms. For example, if the toxic waste from a production process is released into the environment then it may have negative effects such as contaminating the sources of water

supplies. The cost of dealing with this problem is likely to fall upon the state that has to deal with the problem. If there are not to be serious negative consequences as a result of unrestrained market forces then there has to be legislation to restrict the activities of capitalist firms. Such legislation has been passed in some countries but it usually lags behind the problems appearing and causing damage. Also with the natural resources used in capitalist production, e.g. oil, it is only the cost of extracting them which is calculated. What is not taken into account is that many of them are finite and if used without restraint will eventually be exhausted thus storing up major problems for future generations.

Another inherent feature of capitalism is that unless it continually grows – expanding both output and sales of commodities - it starts to malfunction, as can be seen at the present time. The round of bank failures during 2007-8 sparked off a downward spiral of falling demand, falling output and falling employment. Capitalist governments have been taking desperate measures to try to arrest this decline. One measure is to try to boost consumer demand. Apostles of the market such as Gordon Brown and George Bush became born-again Keynesians, injecting massive amounts of public money into banks in order to prevent a financial crisis turning into a major economic depression. They came to realize that if the free market were allowed to continue unchecked then the outcome would be economic and social chaos.

There is no such thing as a stable, steady-state capitalism and it is this built-in need for growth that is generating the growing environmental problems in the world. *Capitalism either grows or it dies.* The insatiable need to produce ever more commodities is exhausting the stock of natural

resources, the burning of fossil fuels and the clearing of rain forests is bringing about global warming and atmospheric pollution, intensive farming causes depletion of water resources and desertification. This imperative to grow is supported by massive advertising campaigns – as already mentioned – and the creation of vast consumer debt to stimulate sufficient demand to consume the never-ending flow of commodities produced by capitalist firms.

It is unlikely that actions by international bodies such as the United Nations and the G20 group of major countries can sufficiently curb the degradation of the environment brought about by capitalism so as to avoid a major disaster for the human species. One important reason is that the world is divided among a number of *imperialist* capitalist powers which are in antagonistic contention for economic, political and cultural domination of the whole world. The underlying factor driving this conflict is the necessity for capitalist economic expansion and the resulting need to dominate other countries. The major imperialist power in the world today is the USA but it is coming into contention with the EU bloc of capitalist countries, e.g. differences over invading Iraq. Also there are new imperialist powers emerging – Japan, China, India, Russia – so imperialist rivalry will intensify. Indeed, one important reason as to why the Copenhagen Conference was unable to reach an internationally binding agreement was the refusal of the Chinese Government to enter into any accord which would place any restrictions on economic activities internal to China. Chinese capitalism is growing at historically unprecedented rates and is heavily dependent on international markets in which to sell its output. Any barriers, both internal and external, to the continuation of its economic growth could start to unravel the Chinese economy and lead to great social unrest and upheaval in one of the



most unequal societies in the world.

Also rivalry and contention among the imperialist states could lead to new, major inter-imperialist wars as happened with World Wars One and Two. These would bring about massive destruction of people and things. Given this intense conflict between rival capitalist ruling classes it is unlikely that they will be able to form an effective world-wide system of regulation with the power to take the necessary measures to arrest and reverse environmental degradation. The United Nations is unable to fulfil this role because it is *not* an emerging world government but one means by which the major imperialist powers maintain their domination over other countries, especially the poorer, less developed ones.

The emergence and development of capitalism was a great step forward for the human species. It is superior to earlier types of society such as slavery and feudalism. This economic system did greatly raise material living standards for hundreds of millions of people while simultaneously generating great poverty for many more. But now capitalism is reaching the limits of its possible development on a world scale. Either we destroy it or it will destroy us. There is an urgent need to abolish capitalism.

### WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

What type of society could replace capitalism? There are two broad answers to this question, one of which looks to *the past*, arguing that we must return to some earlier stage of human social development, and the other which looks to *the future*, advocating that we create a new, more advanced

type of human society than those which have previously existed:

Some environmentalists, especially those of anarchist persuasions, favour a return to some form of a *pre-industrial*, agriculturally based mode of living. They envisage a society consisting of small, decentralized and relatively autonomous communities engaged in low technology farming and handicrafts. It is claimed that this could bring about a non-destructive and sustainable relationship between people and our natural environment. This view tends to romanticise life in pre-industrial societies by overlooking the low levels of human material welfare that such societies can deliver and their social and cultural limitations. This can be seen in the case of the communities of this type still existing in the world today. Also it tends to assume that pre-industrial societies typically had a non-antagonistic relationship with their natural environments. This was often far from the case as is illustrated by the desertification of large parts of Central Asia brought about by overgrazing of grasslands by pastoral nomads. Furthermore the levels of population density that primarily agricultural societies can sustain are relatively low. There simply is not enough suitable land for the present world population to survive by engaging in an agricultural way of life. Advocates of this position often claim that a drastic reduction in the present level of population is necessary so that we can survive. Some even claim that it would be a good thing if billions of people perished so that the survivors could adopt a sustainable way of life. This sort of alternative to capitalism is quite impractical and essentially reactionary.

The answer which looks to a new and superior way of life advocates *socialism*, the period of transition towards

*communism*, a classless, stateless world society. In a socialist society it is the great mass of the people, workers, peasants, etc., who come to exercise real power over the major decisions affecting the way we live together. In particular the means of production, the economy, are collectively owned and economic production is organized in a *planned*, rational way so as to maximize the satisfaction of human needs as opposed to maximizing profits for capitalists. A planned economy, in contrast to the unplanned anarchy of capitalism, could interact with our natural environment in a non-antagonistic, non-destructive way. Many people who are concerned about the environment see modern science and technology as dangerous forces driving us towards our doom. However the power of science and technology rationally applied would make it possible for us to actually enhance the capacity of the world to sustain ourselves and other species. The period of socialist transformation leading on to full communism would last for several generations so the sooner we begin, the better.

The economic and social basis for a socialist society is already being generated within advanced capitalism. In its early stages modern capitalism consisted of many small, independent firms producing, exchanging and distributing commodities of a given kind, e.g. cotton thread. There was sharp competition among the different capitalist proprietors with none of them dominating the market in their sphere of production. However the competitive struggle results in some firms gaining a greater share of the market and others losing their shares and going out of business. So over time there has been a tendency for competition to bring about its opposite; *monopoly*. A few very large firms now control production in most fields of activity, e.g. the motor vehicle industry. The tendency towards monopoly is a built-in feature of

capitalism because capitalist firms are always striving to eliminate their competitors. A current case is that of Google which is the dominant search engine of a world scale and is deliberately out to eliminate its competitors such as MSN. Also given the need of capitalism to grow or die, capitalist firms expand outwards from the countries of their origin in the quest for more natural resources, new markets and investment opportunities. Thus the contemporary capitalist enterprise operates on an international basis – *transnational firms* – and thus the whole world is increasingly becoming economically integrated into one vast network, the process of *globalization*.

Thus on a world-scale a growing number of people are being brought into economic connection, the *socialization* of the means of production, distribution and consumption. Instead of consisting of millions of independent producers and small firms the world economy is increasingly organized into a small number of very large transnational firms. A major factor in facilitating rational and efficient organization on such a large scale is the *new information technology*. The economic basis for socialism is emerging within advanced *monopoly capitalism*. However, the transitional period of socialism would not be one where all economic activities are highly centralized. On the contrary the appropriate application of NIT and the political mobilization of people on a mass scale can bring about genuine local autonomy and control of economic life while at the same time relating to the economy of the world as a whole. The goal entertained by some environmentalists that the human species can retreat into small, isolated and self-sustaining pre-industrial communes is an impractical fantasy.

However it should not be assumed that capitalism will peacefully evolve into socialism. In fact the inherent antagonisms within the capitalist system actually sharpen and intensify as



the world becomes dominated by a small number of competing transnational firms and the imperialist states which support them. Destructive wars and ecological destruction are the outcome of the desperate struggles of rival capitalist classes to sustain their system of oppression and exploitation. The ruling monopoly capitalist classes will not just fade away. They have to be forcefully removed. Otherwise they will literally destroy the capacity of our planet to sustain humanity. Only *socialist revolution* can save the planet.

### CAN SOCIALISM WORK?

You may object that socialism has already been tried in Russia and China and ultimately failed with capitalism being restored. This has happened but what is usually ignored and forgotten now are the enormous positive achievements of these attempts to establish socialist societies in very adverse, economically underdeveloped circumstances. The lives of many hundreds of millions of people in these countries were greatly improved. We should not forget that the establishment of capitalism had many setbacks, e.g. the failure of the English Revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The emergence of new, more advanced societies in human history is a very uneven process. We must learn both positive and negative lessons from previous attempts to bring about socialism so as to be more successful in the future.

One important lesson to be learnt from past attempts to construct socialist societies is to pay proper attention to the relationship between human societies and our natural environment. During the nineteenth century the early revolutionary

socialists such as Karl Marx and William Morris were very aware of the negative effects of developing industrial capitalism on the environment. Marx drew attention to the negative impact on the soil of new chemical fertilizers and Morris was concerned about pollution of the atmosphere and water courses and the destruction of nature in general. The growing, antagonistic relationship between people and nature was a central part of the socialist critique of capitalism. However following the Russian Revolution in 1917 the newly-established socialist Soviet Union set out upon a breakneck programme of industrialization. This was necessary to improve living standards in a very poor country and to manufacture the modern armaments necessary to withstand the inevitable attacks from imperialist states. During this intensive drive for modernization all environmental considerations were forgotten. The consequence was massive environmental degradation in the Soviet Union alongside positive economic and social achievements. In the People's Republic of China in the nineteen fifties and sixties there was a greater awareness of environmental considerations with extensive reforestation campaigns and projects to curtail and reverse desertification. It is since the restoration of capitalism beginning in the late nineteen seventies that there has been massive environmental degradation with China now being one of the main generators of greenhouse gases:

It is a paradox of human societies, especially capitalism, that although they are created and sustained by human beings behaving together that at the same time we have lost control over this network of social relationships which we have produced. This is a state of *alienation*. Now under advanced capitalism we have lost control over how we interact with our natural environment. Even the capitalist ruling classes recognize the dangers of climate change but show themselves to be incapable of



controlling it. If we human beings prove to be unable to change our increasingly antagonistic relationship with our natural environment then our extinction is a very real possibility. The main aim of Marxism is human liberation from alienation. In the present situation of growing ecological danger it is urgently necessary that we begin to regain control of our relationship with our natural environment so as to refashion it in ways whereby instead of destroying it we establish a harmonious relationship with it.

***The hour is late. Capitalism is killing the planet. Only socialism can save it.***

**May 2010**

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Contact: [revpraxis@revolutionarypraxis.org](mailto:revpraxis@revolutionarypraxis.org)

Website: [www.revolutionarypraxis.org](http://www.revolutionarypraxis.org)