Environmentalism in the Corporate Climate

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A controlled burn following an explosion on Deepwater Horizon, an offshore drilling unit in the Gulf of Mexico.

At one point early in the environmental debate, there was a belief that corporate executives and their children, having to breathe the air, eat the food, and drink (or swim in) the water, might possibly feel a certain self-interested urgency about saving the planet on which they were the wealthiest inhabitants. Several decades later, the cultural and ethical degeneracy of unmitigated free-enterprise capitalism—ideologically justified in concepts of “deregulation,” “corporate competitiveness,” “cost-effectiveness,” and “personal freedom”—has produced a corporate elite that has shown itself thoroughly unable to grasp, let alone solve, the disastrous and at times irreversible effects of their production policies.

Equally frightening is the manner in which corporate values have contaminated the politics of the environmental establishment. . . .

While the environmental establishment may be very pleased with itself, the toxins are not impressed. As Dr. Barry Commoner has pointed out, “For the first time in the 3.5-billion-year history of life on this planet, living things are burdened with a host of man-made poisonous substances, the vast majority of which are now even more prevalent in animal tissue and the elements than they were twenty years ago when Earth Day first imposed itself on the popular consciousness.” . . .

While some naive environmentalists have fantasies of a new breed of yuppie capitalists grooving on the socially responsible job of cleaning up toxic wastes, the reality is that capital will go anywhere it smells high profit margins. Thus, we now have a new growth industry of toxic cleanup firms which rake in enormous profits from government superfund contracts. These do slipshod work and use the EPA to impose cleanup mechanisms on communities. The mechanisms include, for example, trash- and hazardous-waste-burning incinerators that exist because of the production of waste and toxics. Needless to say, the industry opposes all solutions that demand the elimination of such efforts. . . .

The new “environmental” corporate establishment has managed to reduce both the production and cleanup of toxins to opportunities for profit and career, thus creating another layer of institutional control in which the problem will prove even harder to solve. As more radical demands for the elimination of the production of toxins become widespread, both corporations that profit from producing

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them and corporations that profit from cleaning them up will have a strong material interest in their continued existence. . . .

The trouble with the “greening of the boardroom” is that since boards of directors are specifically charged with maximizing the profits of their corporations, the corporate environmentalists will comprise nothing more than a new layer of corporate apologists to attack grass-roots environmental movements. . . .

So the institutional matrix is frightening: corporate polluters derail environmental regulations in Congress; corporate pollution managers make lucrative deals that neither restrict polluters nor effectively clean up the toxins; government agencies set up ostensibly to protect the environment become captive to the polluters and pollution managers; and corporate boards of directors co-opt the most malleable and greedy environmentalists to clean up their image—but not their products. In this context, talk about grass-roots organizing must extend beyond a romantic populism to an analytical and strategic long-term perspective that challenges institutional power and asserts democratic policy. . . .

Fundamentally, the environmental crisis is a crisis of institutional and corporate production. Acid rain, global warming, pollutants in the air, pesticides, internal combustion engines are products of the chemical, atomic, automobile, electrical, and petroleum industries. As Barry Commoner explains, toxic cleanup is a non sequitur; we learn from physics that “everything has to go somewhere.” Thus the incineration of toxins drives them into the atmosphere, toxins dumped in landfills seep into the water supply, and toxins “filtered” and then dumped into the water supply evaporate into the air and come back to earth as acid rain. Commoner argues that the only successful environmental solutions have been those that have directly banned harmful products—such as DDT or mercury or lead in gasoline.

But any efforts to limit or shape production in these kinds of environmentally sound ways will involve direct confrontations between the “management right” to determine what a corporation will produce and the rights of workers and communities to work and live in safety. Strategies to build effective and democratic trade unions that could break with the current union pattern of slavish obedience to corporate priorities in return for short-term economic benefits for workers, as well as strategies to build citywide and regional coalitions across the boundaries of color, gender, and race, become central to the creation of an effective environmental strategy that might hold corporate executives and elected officials accountable for the ecological impact of their policies. We will need new models for political and economic life—models that combine representative government “at the top” with significant power for direct input into decisions at the grass-roots level, both from workplaces and from communities impacted by any given decision. . . .

The logic of these struggles, of course, leads beyond individual attacks on specific corporate offenders to a need for larger regional strategies that necessarily raise more fundamental redistributive questions. Though many workers have substituted the shopping mall for the union hall as the center of their recreational and cultural life, my own conversations with workers lead me to believe that there is a growing awareness that rampant materialism can offer little real satisfaction or sense of meaning and purpose. A movement that sought to reduce the quantity of goods produced in order to conserve the environment, while simultaneously advocating more egalitarian distribution of what was being produced, could gain the allegiance of many working people in the years ahead. The Right’s vision of unchecked corporate behavior and a state sector designed primarily to serve corporate interests may be increasingly vulnerable to ecological challenges, particularly if an ecologically based campaign for a smaller but safer GNP were linked to plans for a strong safety net for the unemployed and the poor, guaranteed medical and health care, low-cost and high-quality public education and transportation systems, and the use of tax revenues for recreation and the support of new cultural endeavors.

The deepening ecological crisis requires that we move beyond narrow and allegedly more realistic approaches to strategies that can actually address the full depth of the crisis. This necessarily will involve a more rational planning of production and uses of resources. Yet only a powerful grass-roots movement could plausibly develop the strength to counter those corporate interests which will continue to oppose rational planning. After almost two decades of bipartisan eulogizing of the civilizing role of “market forces,” our political, material, and ethical environment is deteriorating rapidly. So despite the fact that many on the Left have abandoned a transformative vision and have placed much of their energy into more narrow self-interest struggles, the reality of the ecological crisis requires the reemergence of a more visionary and radical movement. Environmentalism—in the sense of a comprehensive politics that addresses the nature and quality of work, the products we produce and the processes of production, and the political institutions that determine social policy—is in urgent need of a Left perspective. Conversely, a democratic, militant, and grass-roots environmentalism that brings working people and people of color into the mainstream of the political debate can contribute to the reemergence of a vital American Left.

The environmental crisis is not solvable locally. Thus, while grass-roots movements are essential building blocks and catalysts they cannot be substituted for a broader political strategy to transform policy and power at the national level. ■