

What lies between the Red and the Green?

The context of these interviews is an attempt to provide space for those critically engaging within the ecological debate. There is a current movement (re)combining the red and the green, although maybe they've never really been apart.

Ecological divisions?

On the one hand ecological activists have been accused of ignoring the structural basis of capitalism, of not recognising the class nature of society or the role of profit driven commodity production and hence not able to articulate solutions (or if that seems too proscriptive – try 'sites of struggle') to the eco-systemic crises that could transcend these divisions.

Because they don't recognise class divisions in society they tend to attribute equal responsibility, or agency for change to all sections of the population, equally. This means that the solutions for change are necessarily limited to calls for voluntary reductions in consumption, or for a moral or cultural change in our relationship to the environment - which if adopted society-wide would result in a better world for all. But this approach is also open to co-option, and even the more radical ecologists calls for a rethinking in consumption levels or for 'social change not lifestyle change' (without specifying the *agency* for this change), can easily be recycled into a State pressure for 'austerity measures'. These could be seen as a way to push the cost of the ecological crises back onto the working class, and not onto States and Capital. A related point is that of characterising the developed North as 'rich' and the global south as 'poor' which fails to recognise the class divisions within, rather than only in between both North and South. Obviously the Global South *is* poorer than most of developed North, but it could be argued that the injustice of the poverty there isn't directly related to the consumption levels of the average wage worker in the North, and that by linking this directly to the poverty of the South can leave the only logical route for change to be some sort of solidarity of poverty.¹ In short a worse existence for the majority and *still* no solution to climate change.

By not critically engaging with how capitalism has historically created, or at least benefited from 'scarcities' at the cost to both humans *and* the environment, the current environmental focus on 'the end of oil' and 'peak everything' could be seen as perfectly compatible with a malthusian view of the working class. In particular the school of thought where an economic crash is something to be embraced - 'i'm glad the price of fuel is going up – at least it will make people use their cars less' - without recognising that an economic crash tends to leave those with the 'most' untouched and disproportionately affects those in most need. Further, this view can lead to unnecessary and unhelpful choices that need to be made ,for example between 'humans' and the 'planet', or between 'work' and the 'environment'.

There is a sense of 'inevitability' about the ecological rhetoric of 'limits to growth' and of 'carrying capacity' which renders invisible the actual economic forces behind this growth. It means that it can't ask the question 'limit to what sort of growth?' or 'what if carrying capacity means the ability of capitalism to be carried?', and can end up in calls (in the extreme cases) for a return to the paeolithic period, or for a glamorisation of the relocalised feudal systems, pre-technology , but still extremely value laden.²

Class war against the planet?

Alternatively those who focus purely on class struggle, on the importance of our labour in creating value and profits for capitalists have been accused of ignoring actually existing real ecological limits, and of the original source of all wealth - the soil. By focusing on the inequalities inherent within capitalism and how it affects the working class, those of red persuasion have been accused of encouraging yet more rampant consumption, a race to the bottom ecologically. They have been accused of being dogmatic in their dismissal of ecological concerns, of glorifying industrial agribusiness, and of ignoring the horror of 'actually existing' socialism/communism. They have been accused of ignoring the possibilities of culture and morality in driving social change and of being utopian in downplaying ecological issues until

after 'the revolution' after which everything will magically work out fine.³

Transition Towns and Social Change

Both these views are obviously parodies, though they may contain some elements we recognise. Floating around the edges at the moment is a movement called Transition Towns⁴. It seems to embrace certain elements of both views whilst simultaneously rejecting them. For example a focussing on re-localisation, and planning as a means of economic development, whilst simultaneously engaging with local businesses and market forces. there are calls to get off the treadmill of consumer society whilst less emphasis on the current (worsening) conditions of work as part of this, or for 'collectively unleashing the genius of the community' without talking about unions, or even the concept of unions. In short there is a lot of talk of things being produced in common, without mentioning the processes of commoning, communalism,communism.

There is a desire to break away from the old paradigms of 'scarcity' to embrace new ones of 'abundance', whilst simultaneously organising specifically around 'peak oil' or 'the end of cheap oil'. There is a desire to be 'inclusive of everyone' whilst their own founder admits to be organising 'under the radar'. By this I don't mean that Rob Hopkins has ulterior motives, is a secret class war member, but like it or not, any movement that is calling for collective buying of alternative energy systems (essentially removing the source of profit from energy corporations), better public transport networks (removing the source of profit from car and fuel corporations), a different way to measure GDP (highlighting inequalities of wealth and the screwing of statistics from those that reflect profit, to some that reflect reality), that creates local currencies (specifically to prevent the free movement of capital) - and does this using grassroots democratic non heirarchical networks - well all this is *actually* fairly confrontational, if not to the specific human members of elite classes, then certainly to their interests. By attacking Capital then those who have the most to lose will surely respond antagonistically situation. Capital has historically not accepted offers of ceasefire from any communities that obstruct profits and accumulation. And no declarations of 'open and inclusiveness' or 'no one is too blame, the rain falls on everyone' will change this.

Confused? So am I. So in an effort to clarify/add to this confusion I am interviewing a broad range of people with a diverse range of opinions, specifically to see what emerges from the overlapping areas of red and green.

please fill in the interview below and send to stuffit@riseup.net

What lies between the red and the green?

- 1) I am concerned that the environmental crises are reaching or have reached tipping points. Carbon Dioxide emissions need to be reduced and the burning hydrocarbons in the current quantities needs to be stopped. How do we do this?
- 2) Many people are also worried about rising fuel costs and 'peak oil'.George Caffentzis wrote that "two things are missing from most contemporary debates about the 'peak oil curve': capitalists and workers" This is very interesting. Do you have any thoughts on this?
- 3) Sometimes when debating with people about 'peak oil' there is an unspoken acceptance that the current market system is natural, unchallengeable,invisible. Accepting the current oil price rises *without* also questioning the current systems of overproduction,product obsolescence & supply chains that ship products over entire continents to generate profits through cheaper labour seems to be letting the actual systems at the root of this crises off the hook. Because of this then, it appears as though the only possible response in this case, is to withdraw entirely from conversation

about *how* hydrocarbons are produced and used. To leave the coal in the hole, or the oil in the soil. Solutions become a different less polluting energy source. An alternative energy source without an alternative society. But this could be seen as confusing systems with inputs. This narrative works to obscure the role of States and Capital in determining how hydrocarbons are used. It collapses States and Capital into 'we' and then says if 'we' don't stop using so much oil 'we' will 'inevitably' be led into resource wars over the dwindling supplies. Is there a way to bridge this divide?

- 4) How can we reconcile the need to reduce consumption on one hand with the incredible statistics of rising inequality in the UK since the 70s? Is there a way to pre-empt State imposed austerity measures by pushing the cost back onto Capital, and at the same time organise against consumer society – in short recognising the needs of both our species and that of the ecology?
- 5) Sometimes people of my age (33) have no memory of unions & radical working class struggles. Our collective history started in Seattle and the environmental protests and direct actions of the 1990s. As a consequence of this forgetting, our idea of work as a site of struggle, or of unions as having something to offer the ecological movement or a role to play in any transition from hydrocarbons are lacking. Is there a way to bring these two currents together?
- 6) The other day I went to speak to some of the striking Shell dockers. We talked about oil/ecology/wages/austerity and I gave them a pamphlet about 'Transition towns and what it means for social change'. Afterwards whilst reading an article about them on a local newspapers' website I posted up comments defending them both from environmentalists who accused them of polluting the earth, and from other people who accused them of destroying the economy and making their life harder. How do we increase the concept of solidarity?
- 7) In a similar theme it isn't uncommon to encounter the sentiment that it's good that the price of oil is going up, that everything is running out as it will stop people consuming as much and force them to change their behaviour. I'm not so sure it is. What do you think?
- 8) One reason why I think the Transition Towns movement has got so popular so fast is that they are inclusive, that they are offering a positive vision of the future, and that they are also *busy* getting things done. They are not waiting for that moment in the future when the revolution finally happens and capitalism is swept away. On the other hand they are committed to engaging with local councils and local businesses. They say that 'we are all in this together'. Some people would say that this is an entirely skewed view of the world, that denies class struggle as one of the driving forces of social change and is in effect offering a ceasefire to the forces of capitalism and endless accumulation, which is inevitable going to be rejected. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of TT?
- 9) What are the politics of carbon rationing?
- 10) What do you think lies in-between the red and the green?

- 1 This is a contentious point explored more in the article 'Why are many people in developing countries poor?' <http://www.gegenstandpunkt.com/english/poverty.html>
- 2 If all these terms like 'accumulation', 'Capital' , 'profit driven commodity production' and 'austerity' feel meaningless to you then the reading list located at <http://www.stuffit.org/carbon/ecologyclass.html#readinglist> may be of use. This also applies if concepts like 'class struggle' and 'working class' make you think of people in flat caps and northern accent
- 3 Similarly if 'carrying capacity' and 'real ecological limits' make you feel queasy then the above URL may help.
- 4 For more on Transition Towns see: transitionculture.org