

Producing Crisis: Green Consumerism as an Ecopedagogical Issue

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The junk merchant doesn't sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to the product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client. – William S. Burroughs (2003, p. 224)

In medieval times, the socially condoned form of responding to one's sinful behavior was to purchase an indulgence from the Church, a kind of pardon issued by the clergy that said all was well once again for the monetary contributor between the kingdoms of heaven and earth. Today, when the megamachinery of society regularly results in the blowback of political and economic upheaval, the public is routinely told by the state (e.g., Bush, 2001; 2006) and its neoliberal ideologues (e.g., Friedman, 2008) that the smart person's solution to these problems is simply to spend and shop. This amounts to more than just the strings of people's everyday lives being pulled and persuaded by greedy capitalist puppet masters, it is symptomatic evidence of the affluent society's generally insane commitment to what has been termed "fundamentalist consumerism" (Levine, 2009). This fundamentalism's ruling idea—that larger structural disorders can be properly rectified through acts of individual consumer choice—has become particularly ubiquitous in connection to our planet's burgeoning ecological crisis. Here, an ostensibly enlightened buying public concerned with the degradation of the Earth's limited natural resources, practices "buycotts" that signal to business and government alike that society is ready to pay for the sustainable production of goods and services in specific market sectors. Thus hailed by consumers, it is the green consumerist belief that businesses then respond by adding corporate social responsibility to their missions, opening production lines of "green" market goods, and by becoming less ecologically rapacious forces in the world.

Emerging from the legacy of Reaganomics and Thatcherism, green consumerist ideology entered into the mass consciousness on both sides of the Atlantic through widely popular self-help environmentalist bibles like *The Green Consumer Guide* (1988) and *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* (1989). In 1992, the idea of green consumerism additionally gained traction in policy debates with the publication of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development's *Agenda 21* – a document that pointed to the developed world's extreme over-consumption of natural resources as a primary sustainability issue requiring the development of eco-efficiency strategies and market instruments capable of shifting consumption patterns.¹ Importantly, *Agenda 21* also called for sustainable consumption through "a radical realignment of social and economic institutions" (Seyfang, 2005, pp. 292-93), imploring governments to employ and integrate qualitatively different visions of wealth and prosperity that would serve the public good. This form of alternative, possibly non-capitalist, sustainable development remains extant today as a critical cultural potential exerting opposition-from-below on mainstream forms of policy and social practice. However, the current majority of sustainable development initiatives undeniably find themselves folded into the interests of global neoliberals in either their aggressive corporatist or Third Way welfarist varieties (Kahn, 2008a).

Since green consumerism's modest beginnings in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the last two decades have seen a steady proliferation of popular books, as well as television shows (and now an entire cable channel), films, Internet sites, and advertisements, all encouraging people to "vote with their dollar" on behalf of supposedly sustainable commodities.² Sometimes these votes are indirect as well, as evidenced by the recently inaugurated Obama administration's

assertion that its election victory amounted to a vote for the governmental investment of hundreds of billions of tax dollars into Big Auto, Energy and Construction towards the creation of millions of “Green Collar Jobs” over the next decade (Schneider, 2009). Therefore, while significant financial investment reports such as GreenBiz.com’s *The State of Green Business 2009* continue to forecast that a green economy remains for the time being more talk than actual walk, it is undeniable that sustainability as a capitalist development paradigm has become an ever-more dominant trend over the last decade in both policy and products.

As we have known since Marx, capitalism both breeds and loves crisis. Pervasive ecological calamity, then, allows for green consumerism to emerge as perhaps the ultimate form of “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2008) seen to date.³ It is an opportunity for corporations to turn the very crisis that they generate through their accumulation of capital via the exploitation of nature into myriad streams of emergent profit and investment revenue.

Green Consumerism as Public Pedagogy

“*Consum-ere*,” the Latin root for consuming, means to take up completely, make away with, devour, waste, destroy, spend.... “Good consumerism” simply extends and legitimates our impulses to destroy, to ruin ourselves and our environments, to waste away our natural and social inheritance, to produce decay and rot. – Gustavo Esteva & Madhu Suri Prakash (1998, p. 17)

Whether it is a hybrid vehicle, organic food, an energy efficient light bulb, shade grown coffee and fairly traded chocolate, non-toxic housecleaning supplies, or a properly “greened” ethical investment stock portfolio, all manner of consumer life has begun to offer options for people seeking to be more socially and environmentally conscious in their lifestyles. Moreover, some or all of these may be appropriate responses to our historical moment as people attempt to live more sustainably in a highly capitalized society. Yet, critical due diligence is also required of them. For our educational relationship with the ecological issues that these products purport to help solve is reduced and cheapened when we accept that buying the new “eco-friendly” formula thereby absolves us of deeper levels of social inquiry and political action.

Certainly, it is true that no product in itself necessarily prevents our further commitment to establishing a transformative relationship to the world. However, when taken as a whole, the culture of green consumerism can easily serve as a way to socially reproduce the dominant social order through a wide variety of narcoleptic shopping exercises that profess our collective salvation via the growth of individuals’ mounting credit debt. In this respect, Henry Giroux (2005) has written of the ways in which corporations and the dominant business discourse today mark

the space of a new kind of public pedagogy, one in which the production, dissemination, and circulation of ideas emerge from the educational force of the larger culture. Public pedagogy in this sense refers to a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain. Under neoliberalism, pedagogy has become thoroughly reactionary as it operates from a variety of education sites producing forms of pedagogical address in which matters of personal agency, social freedom, and the obligations of citizenship

conceive of political and social democracy as a burden, an unfortunate constraint on market relations, profit making, and a consumer democracy.

Mainstream green consumerism should be conceived of as public pedagogy in exactly this manner, for it serves to weaken robust ideas of political and social democracy as personal agency, social freedom, and the obligations of citizenship are ideologically tethered to capitalist market relations and renewed profiteering.⁴ In the form of a feel good catharsis, the take home message of green consumerism is largely to stop worrying about the big problems and to instead do one's little part for sustainability through endless repetitions of spending on behalf of "the planetary good." Of course, it is far from clear how increasing one's acquisition of sustainable commodities in any way represents real opposition to either a culture defined by hyperconsumption or an economic structure that demands it.

Global Psychosis?

Our complex global economy is built upon millions of small, private acts of psychological surrender, the willingness of people to acquiesce in playing their assigned parts as cogs in the great social machine that encompasses all other machines. They must shape themselves to the prefabricated identities that make efficient coordination possible...that capacity for self-enslavement must be broken. – Theodore Roszak (1995)

In 1961, the psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted the first in a famous series of experiments in which test subjects assigned the role of "teacher" believed that they administered electroshocks in 15 volt increments to a remote "learner," supposedly in order to evaluate the role of punishment as a pedagogical technique for improving poor performance (see Milgram, 1963).⁵ Unaware that the experiments' stated aims were a hoax in which the "learner" was in fact an actor who would consistently broadcast tape-recorded cries of pain beginning at 75 faux volts of shock, the "teachers" of the research study assumed that they were causing (potentially grave) injury to their fellow research participant. Video footage of the experiments reveals the "teachers" as initially concerned, and then increasingly resistant and demonstrably upset, by the apparent effects of their sadistic activity when the voltage they believed that they discharged grew steadily higher. Still, upon being encouraged to persist with the research by an overseeing expert, at 150 volts, over 82% of the "teachers" continued to deliver what they believed to be additional electric shock to the "learner," and startlingly some 65% did so all the way until 450 volts – the experiment's highest electricity register.⁶

One participant, after repeatedly begging to check on the "learner" (who had stopped responding after complaining about heart trouble at 300 volts), found his demands casually rebuffed by those in charge, which resulted in his asking nervously multiple times, "Who is going to take responsibility for this?" Upon being told that the lead investigator would take full responsibility and that he as "teacher" would be absolved of any, despite showing signs of severe psychological agitation, this "teacher" then continued to complete the experiment and administer numerous shocks at 450 volts to the "learner." Finally, he had to be stopped from doing so through external intervention. Thus, the Milgram experiments were stunning rituals of duty to perceived power norms that served to reveal how even well-meaning people would continue in the large to be obedient agents for a dehumanizing system, if they believed it to be under the control of responsible authorities. Faced with moments of personal crisis, the majority of test

subjects responded by repressing the moral demand that they transform their relationship to the crisis situation by radically opposing the structure that supported it. Buoyed in this response by the belief that their hierarchical superiors would shoulder the accountability for their actions, Milgram's "teachers" instead demonstrated how aggravated social crisis could easily result in the ongoing reproduction of overt status quo expectations in individuals' lives.

In many respects, Milgram's 450 volts is our contemporary threat limit of 450 parts per million (ppm) of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO²), a tipping point in which leading climatologists now believe planetary global warming will hurtle out of humanity's control and engender a worldwide ice-free state of dynamic cataclysm (Hansen, *et al.*, 2008). Whereas Milgram's test subjects repeatedly added 15 volts of pain far past the point when they consciously desired to do so, as a global society we collectively add 2 ppm of CO² annually to our planet's atmosphere despite it being publicly known that our present level of 385 ppm is considered dangerous such that it must be reduced immediately by significant amounts. Now, while there are many sources that contribute to global warming (including non-anthropogenic sources), some of the chief causes for our present climate crisis are the globalization of industrial forms of energy delivery, goods manufacture, transportation, and agriculture/livestock production as the core staples of modern life (IPCC, 2007, p. 105; UNFAO, 2007). Each of us, then, who is a participating member of the global consumer society that is constituted by the hyperconsumption of such staples, is in a sense responsible for its terrible consequences, as we daily help to produce them through our tacit consent of the socio-economic order.

Ecological High Noon

Trouble in the wild waves, Trouble in the wind sprays, Trouble on the green things,
Trouble on the housetops, Trouble in the mountain, Trouble at the river:
Going to see trouble all around this world. – Woody Guthrie (1963, p. 190)

Although global warming has been christened the mega-challenge of our time, of such a magnitude that even the combined and timely cooperation of all the world's nations may no longer be able to prevent its long-term effects (Solomon, *et al.*, 2009), unfortunately the continued expansion of corporate globalization must be linked to another nightmarish set of related but differing ecological catastrophes as well. In 2005, the UN-funded Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) released the most encompassing study to date about the state of the planet's ecology. The report's findings were alarming for the present and dire as regards the future.

To summarize, it found that during the last 50 years, humanity has altered (and mainly degraded) the Earth's ecosystems "more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable time of human history" (MEA, 2005, p. 2). This was done largely on behalf of an exponential demand for primary natural resources that coincides with the social and economic changes wrought by corporate globalization. For instance, between 1960 and 2000, the world's population doubled and the global economy increased by more than six-fold, resulting in more land (e.g., forests, wetlands, prairies, savannahs) being converted for agricultural uses than had taken place during the 150 years prior combined (p. 2). While the majority of the world's farming practices (e.g., industrial monocropping; slash-and-burn) continue to debase soil quality towards desertification, short-term food production via these methods increased by a factor of nearly three, water use doubled (nearly 70% of used water goes to agriculture), half of all wetlands were developed,

timber pulping and paper production tripled while 50% of the forests disappeared, and the damming of flowing waterways doubled hydropower (p. 5). Moreover, over the same time period, unsustainable fishing contributed to grave losses of global mangroves, which were reduced by approximately 35%, as well as of coral reef biomes – our underwater tropical rain forests – which have suffered extinction and damage rates of 20% each respectively (p. 5).

This has led (and will continue to lead) to unthinkable levels of marine species extinction. The rise of commercial fishing is now known to have eradicated some 90% of the ocean's largest fish varieties and it is expected that no commercial fishery will be left active in the world by 2048 based on present rates of catch (Worm, *et al.*, 2006). The effects of post-World War II globalization have been equally profound on other species, as we have experienced 1000 times the historical rate of normal background extinction, with upwards of 30% of all mammals, birds, and amphibians currently threatened with permanent disappearance (MEA, 2005, p. 4). In other words, over the last half-century we are involved in a mass die-off of non-human animals such as we have not witnessed for 65 million years, and worse yet, predictions for the future expect these rates of extinction to increase ten-fold (p. 5).

It should be reiterated that this unfolding natural disaster is also a social disaster for huge numbers of the population – those that World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and multinational corporations do not generally serve to benefit: the global destitute, poor, and working classes who cannot meaningfully partake of the consumer society's living standard improvements (see Kahn 2008a, 2008b). People, especially in the Global South, depend directly upon ecosystem services – a wide range of natural resources and processes – in order to survive. These services, while freely provided by nature, were calculated as contributing some \$33 trillion of global economic value in 1997 (Wilson, 2002, p. 106). It is now known that over the last half-century of globalization at least 60% of ecosystem services have been damagingly overused, with trends growing continually worse and more dangerous, especially for those who can least afford to compensate for such environmental disruption (MEA, 2005, p. 1). In the face of such staggering statistics, we should remain skeptical of green consumerism's connotations of sustainability.

Running on the Treadmill

The Chairman of the board will always tell you that he spends his every waking hour laboring so that people will get the best possible products at the cheapest possible price and work in the best possible conditions. But it is an institutional fact, independent of who the chairman of the board is, that he'd better be trying to maximize profit and market share, and if he doesn't do that, he's not going to be chairman of the board any more. If he were ever to succumb to the delusions that he expresses, he'd be out. – (Noam Chomsky, quoted in Moyers, 1989, p. 42)

Green consumerism is a particularly limited pedagogy in as much as it suggests an inflated sense of individual agency over the world's industrial processes, when in fact people are often systematically denied critical knowledge and control over the means of the production for the goods they are encouraged to buy. Just as Milgram's research participants almost never awoke to ask the most relevant questions of the experiment's structure itself, so too do informed consumers often fail to recognize that "green" products (if they are that) do not arise in the world as retail commodities *ex nihilo*. Green consumer goods are first and foremost products of a

particular form of economic system that, according to Lauren Eastwood (2006), “has little to do with the fiction of rational choice and far more to do with psychological manipulation...Capital accumulation relies not only on the production of goods, but also...on the production of the willing consumer” (pp. 118-119).

In other words, green consumerism often occludes the “treadmill of production” (Gould, Pellow & Schnaiberg, 2008) of which it is a part. Per treadmill theory, the last sixty years have seen the continued investment of capital to replace production labor with industrial technologies to augment profit. In contrast with manual labor, these technologies have required vast amounts of energy and chemicals to work and have thus caused historically unprecedented amounts of ecological degradation as a result. Further, industrial technology amounts to sunk capital that imposes fixed costs on production owners, thereby requiring a continual increase in the rate of manufacturing to maximize revenue. This itself demands an army of enthusiastic consumers that is guaranteed through marketing and educational strategies (Bellamy Foster, 1999), as well as the complicity of government in order to deregulate production standards, subsidize increased natural resource extraction, and ensure that the environmental effects of industrial mass production are born by the public even as profit remains privatized.⁷

Sustainability education, then, must move beyond training people for membership in the green economy. Rather, it must relate critiques of consumption to production as part of a larger reconstructive political project concerned with the radical democratization of the workplace and the larger society. Such a Reddish-Blue/Green pedagogical alliance as I envision emerges out of a dialectic of absolute negation (McLaren, 2003) and involves learning how the domination of nature proper is prototypical of all other forms of social alienation and dehumanization.

For Critical Ecopedagogy

Today, we can easily imagine the extinction of the human race, but it is impossible to imagine a radical change of the social system – even if life on earth disappears, capitalism will somehow remain intact. – Slavoj Žižek (1999)

Change may have come to America with the ascension of Barack Obama to the throne of *Prima Imperator* but then let us all hope that such change trickles down to the head of the White House’s National Economic Council, Lawrence Summers. It is nothing short of ominous that the person fronting America’s present economic agenda is the same individual who as the Chief Economist of the World Bank argued in 1991 that:

There are no...limits to the carrying capacity of the Earth that are likely to bind any time in the foreseeable future. There isn’t a risk of an apocalypse due to global warming or anything else. The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit, is a profound error and one that, were it ever to prove influential, would have staggering social costs. (Quoted in George & Sabelli, 1994, p. 109)

During the same period, a then confidential memo from Summers contained this ecological wisdom, “Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]? I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable” (quoted in Bellamy Foster, 2002, p. 60).

This decade, while serving as Secretary of the Treasury under Bill Clinton, Summers (along with Alan Greenspan) intervened on behalf of Kenneth Lay and Enron in the energy crisis that the corporation was secretly manufacturing throughout the state of California. Despite then-Governor Gray Davis's contention that corporate malfeasance was the primary cause of the state's electricity woes, Summers instead urged him that they were more properly analyzed as resulting from a market crisis that would be best addressed by the immediate removal of consumer rate caps and a rapid environmental deregulation of the energy sector (Eichenwald, 2005). The ideology voiced by Summers—in essence, Neoliberalism 101—represents everything we must whole-heartedly oppose and educate against if sustainability is to be more than a noxious greenwash in our lifetimes.

While I am certainly not hostile to popular educational calls to rethink the ecological design of schools or champion increased outdoor experiences for children, such as sponsored by the *No Child Left Inside Coalition*⁸, these initiatives profoundly block ecoliteracy to the degree that they leave robust structural critique and learning how to organize collective opposition to capitalist social relations off the agenda. To work in a community garden can teach the sort of core values about the cultural commons, care, self-sufficiency, and biophilia that are the likely pathways to a sustainable future. However, there is nothing in this work that necessarily entails knowledge about the political economy of the transnational class or the bludgeoning militarism of the plutocratic super-elite. This dangerous insufficiency is more evident still in green consumerist acts.

Lewis Mumford (1970) wrote:

Once an organic world picture is in the ascendant, the working aim of an economy of plenitude will be not to feed more human functions into the machine, but to develop further man's incalculable potentialities for self-actualization and self-transcendence, taking back into himself deliberately many of the activities he has too supinely surrendered into the mechanical system (p. 395).

Part of ecopedagogy for sustainability, as I envision it, is taking back our humanity by learning about the dehumanizing capitalist system: its history, how it operates, for whom, and what potentials it holds. This form of study is part of what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (2001) call the articulation of a critical, multiperspectival and reconstructive social theory. Due to our present age's heightened sense of danger and complex manifestations of power, environmental education of any kind that operates devoid of such a critical theory crosses a bridge at the edge of the world to nowhere. Still, social theory without a literacy foundation of sustainable practice is itself a barrier preventing the autochthonic liberation of human instincts for peace, beauty, and joy. Just as there is no sense in homesteading in a forest beseeched by a Weyerhaeuser clearcut, so too ranting about capitalism without putting daily foot to the production of its alternative is symptomatic more of nihilism than planetary emancipation.

As Panitch and Leys (2007) argue, we must make multiple moves in our political education: from blind consumerism to a mobilization against specific corporations to an organized understanding of the unsustainable logic of the capitalist system *in toto*. Then, we must go further still by pushing past the imaginative inertia that can easily set in when we daily confront the juggernaut of global neoliberalism and all its ecological perils in the abstract. Sustainability will not come as easy as a grocery aisle, but it is not impossible either. By contrast, its very possibility becomes ever more manifest as we participate in the ongoing struggle for another world. All power to the imagination!

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Notes

¹ Regarding the hyperconsumption of the global North, the WorldWatch Institute (2006) has reported that 60% of private consumption takes place amongst the 12% of the world's population that lives in North America and western Europe, while the peoples of south Asia, sub-Saharan Africa (who constitute 1/3 of the global population) account for only 3.2% of private consumer spending.

² Some more recent green consumerist books include *The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Simple Step at a Time* (2007), *The Virtuous Consumer* (2007), and *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices* (1999). Beginning in 2008, the Discovery

company launched Planet Green, a 24-hour eco-lifestyle television network that broadcasts shows like Emeril Green and Greenovate. For films, while neither Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* nor Leonardo Di Caprio's *11th Hour* emphasized green consumerism, choosing instead to propound an apocalyptic sense of ecological upheaval, both importantly conclude by emphasizing what individuals can do in terms of their buying habits to help save the world. Endless websites – including one by virtually every major environmental organization – focus on green consumerism, but a major example is: coopamerica.org. For examples of green consumer advertising campaigns, see:

http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Greenwashing/United_States.

³ Again, we must here distinguish between mainstream forms of green consumerism and counterhegemonic varieties extant in at least some vegan, slow food, DIY, permacultural and other subcultures.

⁴ As watchdogs of school commercialism point out, corporations also seek to use school curricula as another pedagogical avenue for rooting green consumer ideology to their benefit. For instance, Molnar (2006) describes a 1983 visit to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development where he encountered free curricular materials from McDonald's on nutrition and the environment (pp. 65-66). He goes on to write that, besides McDonald's, he has learned that "the pork farmers, the plastic bag manufacturers, the Dairy Council, the timber industry, the oil industry...and many, many more have a curriculum to offer" (p. 66). In Kahn (forthcoming), I document the story of a Chicago-area vegan teacher who was fired in part for educating in opposition to the crass eco-commercialism of the Dairy Council in his school.

⁵ The Milgram experiment was recently replicated and re-confirmed (see Burger, 2007).

⁶ In Milgram's first experiment all test subjects deployed the maximum 450 volts to the "learner" without question. So Milgram devised additional factors that he thought should make it less likely that they would do so for additional tests. For instance, the final three levers of over 400 volts were labeled "Danger severe shock XXX" and the "learner" began to express increasingly vociferous demands to end the experiment starting at 150 volts.

⁷ A great interactive lesson in the treadmill is at: <http://thestoryofstuff.com>.

⁸ For more on the Coalition and its aims, see <http://nclcoalition.org>.