Compassionate capitalism: Ecocide with a smiley face

Contributed by Lorna Salzman
18 July 2008

"We all agree that development that pollutes and destroys in order to enrich the already-rich is morally wrong. But development that pollutes and destroys in order to help the poor is just fine. We owe it to the poor. This is Compassionate Capitalism. And it is as ruthless, unforgiving and unjust as the old kind."

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Imagine a crew of poor and minority construction workers. After years of poverty, lack of opportunity and discrimination they finally have secure, well-paying jobs with good benefits.

They are building a new village that will house low and moderate income families, including themselves. This village is located downstream from a high dam that provides hydropower for the region.

The dam is old and recent inspections have revealed serious flaws that could result in dam failure that could wipe out the village and cause severe loss of life. The exact date of such failure is unknown but the risk is large and real and engineers and geologists recommend that the village be evacuated and rebuilt elsewhere as a precautionary measure, until the dam is repaired.

Repairs sufficient to guarantee dam integrity will be expensive and will take up to three or four years to complete. The costs are unknown as are the sources of funding. State revenues are scarce and the federal government has cut back on infrastructure repair. It is not known whether funds will be made available, how much and when.

The villagers, which include the construction workers, do not welcome the cost and inconvenience of relocation so they decide to remain where they are, figuring that dam repair as well as village development will provide lots of jobs. Some of them distrust the engineers and geologists and their predictions. Some of them believe that the repairs can be completed in a shorter period of time. Some believe the dam is fundamentally sound and doesn't need much repair, if any. The village, county, state and federal officials meet, confer, haggle, argue, hiring consultants, holding public hearings, debating costs and benefits and wasting over two years on the problem due to conflicting opinions.

While dam repair contracts are put out for bidding, the construction workers continue their work on building housing developments, schools, shopping centers, churches and light industrial structures. Investment is attracted to the area. The village expands and becomes a small city, with a larger economy and local industry, and residents prosper. Lots of cars and RVs are sold, large air conditioned homes on large lots with swimming pools are built as is an airport, and the interstate is extended to the city. Shopping malls appear on the outskirts. Several banks open new branches. Sewage systems are extended to the new developments and a large water supply system to deliver water from the river is also expanded. The increase in energy demand results in construction of two new coal powered plants and plans are laid for a nuclear plant at a "safe" distance, to accommodate growth.

Three years later, the dam breaks, destroying the entire city, killing most of its residents.

This story is fictitious but the situation it describes is not. It is what we face now with global warming. Those who staked their own lives on the integrity of the dam were mainly low income minority workers, who had faith in "the system" and in technology. There are millions more of these among us today who doubt there is a global warming crisis and who believe that new jobs and technology to help the unemployed and the minorities should come first. To rationalize this, they denigrate the seriousness of the climate change situation and, like the village construction workers, look to technology and renewable energy development as their salvation.

Meanwhile, growth continues, energy consumption expands, the consumer sector continues to spend as before, floods, droughts and wildfires run rampant, water supplies are drying up,food prices rise due to higher energy and import costs, garbage and wastes accumulate, wildlife habitat, open space and recreational lands are sacrificed for roads, malls and development, energy prices skyrocket for numerous and uncontrollable reasons, the oceans die, and the quality of life rapidly deteriorates. And what do these workers and minorities demand? More of the same things that caused the crisis in the first place: cheap energy. Why do they call for this? In order to consume more.

Under all of this is an unswerving religious faith in the need for continued economic growth: for unabated production of goods and consumption, in the name of equity and social justice, to benefit those who had been left out of the country's

prosperity. This is the message just delivered by Niger Ennis, a Republican strategist and head of CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), a beneficiary of Exxon ($275,000 since 1998), who is pushing for cheap energy, more fossil fuel plants and offshore oil drilling. Ennis gave an infamous Capitol Hill briefing, along with climate skeptics, titled "Eco-Imperialism: Reflections on Earth Day." He also said: "We support any candidate that is not cowed by the powerful environmental lobby."

The prosperity approach is also the message delivered by the Apollo Alliance, a front for the Democratic Party and possibly for the auto industry which supports "clean coal." The affiliated 1Sky movement has fairly strong positions on reducing energy consumption (25% reduction from 1990 levels by 2020, 80% by 2050), but they have bought into the carbon trading scam instead of supporting carbon taxes, and promote that now-familiar cliche of "smart growth," without defining it.

Though the term "economic growth" is not the explicit message of Green for All, headed by Van Jones, formerly head of the Ella Baker Center and its "green growth" campaign, its overall thrust of creating "5 million jobs conserving 20% of our energy by 2015" (the 1Sky objective as well), not basing its objectives on science, fails to acknowledge the need to sharply reduce energy consumption in the next three or four years (the time period remaining before we exceed several climate tipping points, according to James Hansen). In so doing it leapfrogs over the global climate crisis to that golden land of opportunity, not comprehending that no amount of renewable energy technology can ever meet our present demand, much less the future demand of the five million new workers in renewable energy who will, if past experience is a guide, use their newfound wealth to emulate the life style of profligate Americans.

A 20% reduction in energy use by 2015 is barely an improvement over the ineffectual Kyoto Protocol proposal. Green for All supported the Lieberman-Boxer energy bill, with some reservations, while most environmental groups declared the bill to be woefully inadequate. Essentially Green for All is an anti-poverty effort with a green tinge, not an anti-global warming effort. And the strongest pro-growth shout emanates from the Break Through Institute, headed by neo-liberal growth and globalization fanatics Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, whose prescription for survival is one word: Prosperity.

It is no accident that most of those pushing for Business as Usual are either members of a minority group or use economic justice as their justification. This is a clever move since it guarantees funding from liberal donors like the Pew Charitable Trust and the Nathan Cummings Foundation as well as the Rockefeller Foundation. It also guarantees credibility in the media and with liberal leaders and organizations, who would rather retire to a desert island than be considered racist.

The subliminal theme here is this: we all agree that development that pollutes and destroys in order to enrich the already-rich is morally wrong. But development that pollutes and destroys in order to help the poor is just fine. We owe it to the poor. This is Compassionate Capitalism. And it is as ruthless, unforgiving and unjust as the old kind.

It is striking that spokesmen for minority groups have for so long found little to criticize about corporate greed, profits and pollution, or capitalism in general, but had little trouble attacking their friends -- the environmental community -- for what they believed was racism and deliberate ignoring of urban minorities.

So the push for millions of new minority jobs also raises the following question: since corporations have shown little or no interest in the needs of minorities or the poor in the past, how much faith can we have that in the hoped-for future renewable energy economy they will make an effort to include them?

The main objective here is to distract the liberals' attention away from the breaking dam and onto the jobs being created in the city beneath the dam as it expands... to distract attention away from the global warming tipping points that we face in the next few years, away from the bad news, away from anything that instills doubt in economic growth and in capitalist society itself.

To express doubt of traditional growth patterns smacks of hardship and sacrifice, especially for the poor. Thus, doubt must be completely abolished by drawing attention to the purported benefits of growth to the poor, by pointing to the jobs... not to the dam. Where are the jobs? We know where they are: in renewable energy, energy efficiency, public transportation, rehabilitation of buildings and infrastructure, local and regional food supplies, weatherization, and elsewhere. These are already cliches. Nothing new there.

But the Good News Bears who want you to ignore the breaking dam don't tell you the truth about these jobs, particularly about how long it will take to bring them to the needy. How long will it take to replace fossil fuel and nuclear plants with wind energy systems? How long to rebuild and expand Amtrak and build new regional and local public transportation

systems to replace air travel and private cars? How long to replace high-energy, processed, prepackaged and imported food with local food supplies? How long before the federal government and the private investors turn away from fossil fuels and nuclear reactors definitively and put their faith and funds into these things?

If you guessed more than five years, you guessed correctly. Try twenty. Or fifty. The problem is that the dam is crumbling in the meantime.

That minority leaders like Ennis and Jones are not aligning themselves with those demanding real solutions to slow down and mitigate global warming through dramatically reduced consumption of energy and goods is truly tragic. That their followers are being duped into supporting the American Dream of increasing consumption of energy and goods -- Compassionate Capitalism -- including a demand for cheaper oil, is testimony to the tragic gullibility that characterizes all Americans, not just the poor and the minorities.

In a nutshell, we don't have a tough uncompromising movement or leadership with curbing global warming as its focus. We have anti-poverty and social justice groups and campaigns posing as green but with a "plentiful lack" of serious proposals to overhaul the entire capitalist/consumer society. It is quite clear that marginal and incremental economic reforms will not slow down the economic growth beast much less threaten its existence.

It appears that even those members of society who have lived at the bottom are not ready or willing to admit that this society is neither sustainable nor reformable. Perhaps they are whistling in the dark. But it is more likely that these reformist groups are being encouraged in their schemes by funders and forces cemented to the concept of economic growth and to capitalism at all costs who welcome the emphasis on jobs and renewable energy as a distraction from the daily reports of accelerating climate change. The revolutionaries, however, are nowhere to be seen.

I've got news for them. Nature doesn't distinguish between rich and poor.

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"We are already fighting World War III and I am sorry to say we are winning. It is the war against the earth." - author Raymond Dasmann

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Further reading:

"Neo-liberals in green clothing: Nordhaus, Shellenberger and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors," by Lorna Salzman:

culturechange.org

Questioning the social-justice-first approach: article, "What is the grassroots' and environmental establishment's main failure?" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #179:

culturechange.org

"Smart Growth: Smart or not? Debunking the myths of sustainable growth" Culture Change magazine, issue 20, 2002:

culturechange.org

1Sky:

1sky.org