Climate Change Pollyannas

Contributed by David Orton
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"Although global warming is connected to scary scenarios featuring soaring temperatures and worsening hurricanes and monsoons, it's also a link to a better future."
- from
Global Warming For Dummies by Elizabeth May and Zoë Caron,
John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd. 2009.

362 pages, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-470-84098-6.

The authors go on to say on page 1,
"Global warming is opening doors for the development of new types of fuels, leading the shift to reliable energy sources, and creating a vision of a greener tomorrow."

In contrast, James Lovelock spoke of a different kind of green thinking, in The Revenge Of Gaia: "This small band of deep ecologists seem to realize more than other green thinkers the magnitude of the change of mind needed to bring us back to peace within Gaia, the living Earth." (p. 198)

Arne Naess said, "We must live at a level that we seriously can wish others to attain, not at a level that requires the bulk of humanity not to reach."

Introduction

"The more you know about both climate change and energy, the less moderate you are." Joseph Romm, Editor, climateprogress.org

This book, Global Warming For Dummies, by Elizabeth May and Zoë Caron, has lots of information about climate change and its various nuances, particularly from the individual, "what you can do", perspective. The focus is on carbon dioxide, the main contributor to climate change. It explains the Kyoto Protocol, how it is supposed to work, carbon emissions trading, the different kinds of greenhouse gases and their individual and collective significance, etc. In addition, this book gives an overall sense of the contributions of various sectors of society to greenhouse gas emissions. We are told that fossil fuels contribute three quarters of the problem regarding greenhouse gases, and that deforestation accounts for one quarter of the problem. (p. 2) Reading Dummies can raise the level of a person's general knowledge about climate change, notwithstanding the various criticisms raised in this review.

May is intelligent, passionate, hard-working, and on top of a wide variety of environmental information. But she also works within the industrial paradigm of values which she essentially accepts and lets guide her political judgements. May's career shows that she "works the system", and the society in turn rewards her with various accolades, because the system's legitimacy is not seriously threatened by her eco-politics. She and co-author Zoë Caron, have chosen to play a Pollyanna role of promoting optimism in fighting climate change, when most of the government and corporate climate change initiatives being put forth are greenwash tokenism at best, which can always be put aside if the world economy takes a dive.

Like other books written by Elizabeth May, this book does not consciously espouse any critical eco-philosophical tradition

which others can support, as does James Lovelock in the above quote. May and Caron do not raise the fundamental questions, which, I believe, climate change and "peak", i.e. diminishing fossil fuels, bring to the foreground for existing industrial capitalist societies, such as:
- how do we humans reduce our industrial impact upon the Earth;

- what are our vital needs as societies, taking into consideration the needs and habitat requirements of all other nonhuman life forms;

- how do humans become Earth-centered in our many cultures, not just human-centered;

- how do we bring about social justice for all the human species in a worldwide context, so everyone's full potential may be liberated; and

- how do we bring about such profound cultural changes for humankind, if we never raise the questions.

May and her co-author, however, are pragmatists -- they point the reader to practical engagement with this existing industrial capitalist society. For these writers, the existing system just needs tinkering with, not replacing. Yet it is this industrial society which is destroying this Earth and which has brought on the climate change crisis.

There is substantial acknowledged use of data from the massive Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in 2007. I have not personally read this latest IPCC document, but I have read some of the numerous climate change books available (by authors such as Andrew Nikiforuk, Tim Flannery, James Kunstler, Brian Fagan, John Livingston [Arctic Oil], George Monbiot, Al Gore, Ted Trainer, James Lovelock, and others), plus William Catton's Overshoot and Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth by William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel).

One should not forget that the IPCC report is a "consensus" document. Debates are influenced by the delegates which member countries appoint, like Saudi Arabia, China and the United States. The report therefore downplays, I believe, the actual gravity of the climate situation, so all will sign on. In his 2005 book The Weather Makers: How We Are Changing The Climate And What It Means For Life On Earth, Tim Flannery calls this "lowest common denominator science." Flannery also notes, "if the IPCC says something, you had better believe it -- and then allow for the likelihood that things are far worse than it says they are." (p. 246)

Dummies points out that the latest IPPC report "recommends reducing carbon emissions by 50 to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050." (p. 55) The reality is that in a continually growing world industrial economy, these emissions increase every year. The present level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is about 385 parts per million, whereas in 1960 the level was 315 ppm. To put this in perspective, the pre-industrial revolution figure for carbon dioxide, around the mid-nineteenth century, was 280 ppm.

While the two authors refer to "climate change" as being a more appropriate term than "global warming", the book title Global Warming For Dummies, presumably reflects an editorial decision of the "Dummies" book publishing/selling formula, of making information supposedly more palatable and popular to the reading public.

Elizabeth May, who would be considered the lead author by most readers (and this reviewer) in view of her past experience and listed credentials, is the current leader of the Canadian Green Party and also its shadow cabinet spokesperson for climate change. So the public could perhaps look to this book to see the kind of ideas on climate change and related topics advocated by the Green Party in Canada. May is not known to hide her credentials and social connections under a bushel. In this book, she is described three times in the comment "About the Authors", and once on the book's cover, as "Dr. May." It seems that having been granted honorary doctorates in the past, now misleadingly equates to having an earned Ph.D., presumably in one of the scientific fields associated with climate change. It should be noted that May's listed background credits include having been "a board member for nine years for the International Institute for Sustainable Development". The conclusion of the Dummies text is a promotion for this Institute (see pages 340-341). Sustainable development is also pushed throughout this book.

Arne Naess, the founder of deep ecology (1912-2009) made a distinction in the early 1970s between those who practice "shallow" ecology and those who follow a "deeper" ecological path. May and Caron follow the shallow path, as this review shows. Those on the deeper ecological path see the industrial system itself as unsustainable from an ecological and social justice standpoint, and climate change as one manifestation of this. To address climate change means addressing the problem of replacing industrial capitalist society.

Pollyanna optimism

"No one likes the blame game; pointing fingers and making accusations doesn't solve anything." (p. 69)

"Governments all over the world at every level, are already doing leading-edge work, moving toward low-carbon technologies and ways of life." (p. 160)

"Can humanity actually avoid getting to the point of huge, devastating, and irreversible changes in the world's climate? Of course!" (p. 200)

"Believe it or not, letters to your elected representatives make a difference...Politicians are eager to know what the people think." (p. 318)

The Pollyanna title for this review -- meaning a false optimism or attitude of looking for the good side of any situation -- is misleading, given the situation we face. The basic working position permeating this book is not that we are facing a civilizational and ecocide crisis of hard to grasp proportions -- which require seismic cultural and institutional changes and lifestyle change which are difficult to comprehend -- with the outcome very much in doubt. But it is the promotion of the view that good things are being done around climate change and global warming, that we are moving in the right direction, and only need to accelerate our efforts. I believe this to be a false, harmful, and very misleading Pollyanna-type message. It is totally inappropriate, considering the dire climate change situation generally, and particularly in Canada, which is proud to be the main fossil fuel supplier to the United States. Very little significant work regarding reducing green house gas emissions is being done. Carbon dioxide emissions are increasing, not declining, each year. Climate feedback mechanisms, which introduce an extreme unpredictability into what is going to happen -- including a potential acceleration of indicators of climate change -- are already underway. There is a fair amount of talk about climate change, but this can always be pushed aside by governing political and economic elites and the bourgeois media, when there is so-called bad economic news, like declining economic growth and consumption rates.

The Pollyanna message also reflects an erroneous but common political organizing belief, characterizing not only May's (and presumably Caron's) environmental politics, but running throughout Green Party electoralism in Canada -- that is, for social mobilization purposes, one has to be optimistic, non-threatening and non-radical, to gain popular or electoral support. However, the kind of institutional, economic and personal lifestyle changes that should be on the climate change table are extremely radical, when someone of the scientific stature of climate scientist James Hansen, among others, is saying that carbon dioxide emissions have to be reduced to at most 350 parts per million, from the existing about 387 ppm. (As noted before, at the time of the commencement of the industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, carbon dioxide concentrations were at about 280 ppm.) Unfortunately, the Green Party is in the business of putting forward fudge and "market" or soothing eco-capitalist positions, which do not call industrial capitalism into question or bring about the needed fundamental shift in societal consciousness.

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Editor's note: David Orton is a deep ecologist based in Canada.
Visit David Orton's Website

David's previous report on Culture Change was Remembering Deep Ecologist Arne Naess