

Are Progressives Barking up the Wrong Tree for \$ocial Ju\$stice?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The Occupy movement refreshingly broke through the corporate media's suppression of the gaping gap between the wealth of the super rich and the rest of us. But many of the movement's adherents seem wedded to misguided expectations, or their route is questionable. For when we mainly demand "a piece of the pie," and it's the same old toxic pie, does this really advance the fundamental changes needed for a just, sustainable society?

Probably not, even if we stand for totally turning around today's warped federal spending priorities.

Moreover, meeting social justice aims would not necessarily result in an ecologically conscious culture, as argued by many social justice activists who rarely address resource limits, climate change, or the system of wage slavery.

So it falls upon imaginative minds to present not just a more realistic alternative, but a more liberated, enlightened vision. Before we offer such, it is important to get at the underlying thinking of those so caught up in targeting the upper crust's monetary wealth and power.

Occasionally the myopia of passionate social-justice activists comes through starkly. A thorough rundown of what most caring folks believe our divided, dysfunctional nation needs is Alternet.org's recent article "Goodbye, Liberty! 10 Ways Americans Are No Longer Free -- Our struggle for liberty is a fight against concentrated wealth," by Richard Eskow. Was he right on the mark or adding to misconceptions?

Questioning "Progress"

Taking an ecological or primitivist tack, let us ask: is our struggle for liberty just a fight against concentrated wealth? To an extent, yes. But consider the unaddressed fact that the more technology there is, the less freedom there is. Yet the measure of success and progress is for one to have more technological devices such as cars, smartphones, grid electric power, and the like. As wondrous as they are, such technologies and systems isolate us, and might be a reason for U.S. consumers to not be ranked among the happiest peoples of the world.

Decades ago in the U.S., the typical workplace was the factory, that most urban people visited regularly. But their homes were away from and not connected to the job, nor were they monitored by the corporate state, as today's technological systems and the "electronic village" make possible. Children's developing brains did not used to be set upon and kept busy by electronic gizmos, with their limited-dimension images and potentially hazardous use. Billions of toxic gadgets using polluting energy are going into landfills annually.

Were the associated jobs and wealth involved all valid, or is the big issue just the distribution of that wealth that was generated? Steve Jobs died with \$8 billion, generated mostly by what was undeniably massive pollution. He donated negligibly to charity, but he is portrayed as a folk legend.

Our common problem according to most of the social justice movement

A few planks of Eskow's progressive/liberal platform-complaint:

- The differences in life expectancy between wealthier and lower-income Americans are increasing, not decreasing.
- Digital corporations are assaulting our privacy, while banks trap us in indebtedness... The shrunken ranks of working Americans are being robbed of their essential liberties – including the right to use the bathroom.
- Social mobility in the United States is dead. Career choices are increasingly limited... Between 1969 and 2008 the average US income went up by \$11,684. How much of that went to the top 10? All of it. Income for the remaining 90 percent actually went down.

There is much additional, important information in the article, and only a cynical let-them-eat-cake would fault its points. But the big picture is missing. This causes Eskow to go into murky waters he doesn't appear to understand. His survey has 10 sections. An 11th and perhaps 12th section would solve his misconception-by-omission. Or, his 10 sections could be consolidated to eight or nine in order to fit in the missing pieces of the puzzle.

The resistance put up by social-justice activists to seeing the whole energy/ecological big picture -- and adding that "11th section" -- is strong. This is because the rest of the picture could subordinate some of the prior 10 points. Until we can all get together and agree on seeing the full nature of our problems, and visualize a true alternative to today's system, we will clamor endlessly about wrongs that cannot be legislated away or righted in the streets with even a vigorous protest movement.

It would seem Eskow's vision is mainly for more employment, of the nicer kind for everyone. But that institution is not about offering freedom, even if it's lucrative employment. Eskow would clarify that, with a demand for kinder bosses and corporations that would be somehow reined in by perhaps a real democratic American government. This approach, when devoid of lifestyle change and putting the embattled Earth first, is all fantasy. But there's a chance Eskow suspects this, and he is trying to feed important information on injustice to the Occupy movement, for example. However, any list of misdeeds and injustices in a highly populated, resource-devouring society needs to be seen as a list of symptoms.

Ridding the idea of the world's having unending resources to support an affluent, middle-class lifestyle has yet to be accomplished. Instead we have the constant debate over how to redistribute financial resources, a hot button for one to sympathize with. This approach fails to question the basic system we live under, or address certain deplorable U.S. cultural values. Besides rampant greed that results in hardships such as homelessness, there is

- the non-raising of one's own children
- putting elders out to pasture
- paving over nature for progress, and
- other forms violence on many levels.

A culture that exploits nature and humans for selfish gain (even for a "decent living"), while imagining growth can be endless and part of our wonderful civilization, is on the way out. But most social-justice activists such as Eskow do not appear to understand collapse or key reasons for it. Typically, in his article he makes no mention of peak oil or the ecological basis of our problems inherent in a highly populated consumer society.

One could argue that one must first "get rid of the banksters" so that ecological protection can finally happen. But meanwhile, buying new cars, buying goods shipped by petroleum, using unnecessary plastic packaging, having lots of gadgets plugged in, persists. And they are what aspiring consumers, including most progressive and liberal consumers still want. Being "green" has made fewer inroads than many people want to believe.

Regarding medical care -- commonly confused as equating good health -- Eskow is right to take into consideration the unnecessary procedures and drugs that people go along with. But the entire medical health system is off base due to mass ignorance of the need to allow healing; the conditions for healing are when today's toxicity and stress are reduced internally to the absolute minimum. Instead of understanding this, medical marijuana and "superfoods" are often touted as the answer, and that all will be well if only the government and Big Wealth are defeated or put in their place.

Eskow's position of demanding less expensive education will change nothing in regard to dwindling Earth resources. "Social mobility" -- which he thinks is good -- is part of the hierarchy system and economic growth. As explained below, sustained growth and a return to growth are now a big fat misconception.

Eskow attributes economic shocks almost entirely to the banking system. While the financial sector has indeed been too loosely regulated, not just leading up to the "peak oil recession" that hit in 2008, this is a narrow view. Stepping back from even the 2008 meltdown, we need to look at per capita energy use -- i.e., gobbling up almost exclusively non-renewable resources -- as declining while population has kept rising. Dwindling oil is actually at least double the nominal cost that people see, due to subsidies, and the high cost is rising despite fluctuations. So now that the peak in conventional oil extraction has hit (2005-2008), growth is over with.

Growth is over with. Sorry, consumers, you can't bring it back even if you seized all of Wall Street's wealth, except for perhaps pulling off a well-organized spurt that would just mean more mass consuming and screwing Mother Earth.

Articles are needed in progressive and environmental publications to address the big picture. Simultaneously, these publications can still make the points that social justice writers like Eskow make -- just in a more complete, honest context.

One big difference between Eskow and the positions in Culture Change would be over the legitimacy of the dominant system and culture. He and many "left" commentators seem to think it can work much better, like it supposedly used to. The implied message of Eskow's and many other better-known writers, when they air their laundry list of outrageous ills and evils, is that if the ills and evils are somehow well aired and tackled with a freer media and better politicians, we have a good chance at getting real democracy. With this naive expectation, reformers lack a radical, realistic critique against the system. Just as bad, they lack an alternative vision for society. To glimpse an alternative vision most readily, one would have to search out eco-villages, for example -- hardly on the radar for the mainstream.

Why the \$ocial-Ju\$tice solution is not deep enough

When Eskow and the mainstream liberal-progressive believe "Our struggle for liberty is a fight against concentrated wealth" there are likely underlying assumptions about, say, specialization. Is the answer to ecocide and lack of community simply a greater availability of fancy jobs enabled by intensive education that excludes practical skills? Eskow writes,

We're losing the ability to rise up from poverty, earn a decent living, or work in the career of our choice. The periodic economic shocks caused by our banking system allowed employers to demand wage concessions while paying ever-increasing salaries and bonuses to their senior executives. The power of unions has been systematically eroded. The drive to provide ever-increasing tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans has led to a decline [in] government jobs, which has shriveled job opportunities in many lines of work.

The key to social mobility is education, and that doorway to opportunity has been steadily closing.

Apart from disagreeing publicly with the above kind of out of date analysis, my humble prescription is for:

- disseminating insight about personal and ecosystem healing
- encouraging people to go car-free
- maximizing sail power to start replacing oil-transport and oil-based travel, and
- spreading eco-music to open people's hearts and minds.

So I will be spending increasingly my energies on those, rather than fighting the system with the often argumentative activism I have long been engaged in. I do support all good causes, and, even if I lament many participants' unreasonable or unclear expectations, may their best goals be met as soon as possible.

Pragmatically, it may be too late to restructure society away from jobs and unwanted work, when we must get to the task of building sailing ships and converting all kinds of craft to sail cargo and passengers. So we need those jobs now. After all, just sixteen of the super cargo ships spew out as much sulphur pollution as all the world's cars. And the days of affordable, abundant bunker-fuel for today's dominant shipping over the water are numbered. This threatens the middle-class lifestyle and material abundance that many liberal and progressive, well-meaning people think might be available to all. And they assume it's possible if only "the 1%" and the banksters were forced to share their loot (what was raped from the Earth), or, if enough of the "bad guys" somehow had to go to jail in a better America.

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Further reading:

Alternet's article "Goodbye, Liberty! 10 Ways Americans Are No Longer Free -- Our struggle for liberty is a fight against concentrated wealth." By Richard Eskow, August 29, 2012

Are (better) jobs the be-all, end-all solution? Is working for others' private gain, while not working for oneself or the community, different from being a "free-range slave"? The term "work" is originally associated with slavery, and the term is not in primitive languages.

We have visited the issue of jobs and work many times in CultureChange.org, most recently in May 2012, in Humanity's chances dimmed when many progressives love slave-jobs and cheap gasoline and in Is "More Jobs" Sustainable or Necessary in the Post-Peak Oil World? in March 2010.

A related recent essay, also by Jan Lundberg, is: Social Justice: Too little and Too Late to Demand More Pay and Better Jobs? , which is part two of Social Justice Activists Must Take Into Account Ecological, Cultural, and Economic Transformation (Part 1). It appeared on Alternet.org on May 5, 2011.

Yet, as stated in the above article "Progressives and liberals barking up wrong tree for \$ocial Ju\$tice," there is urgency for restructuring society through all means, including jobs that make an immediate, positive difference.

