

Insufficiently radical

Climate change and the free market

by Phil Harrison

The current debate around climate change leaves me cold. As we press and prod our government into signing up to Kyoto, berate the Americans for their SUVs and their complacency, and castigate ourselves every time we drive or leave the lights on, I can't help but wonder if, in the midst of all this, we're missing the point. Monbiot tells us that unless we reduce our carbon footprint by ninety percent, yes, ninety percent, we will have very little impact anyway. Lovelock, the great scientist who gave the world the notion of Gaia, already believes it's too late.

Ultimately what is required is social transformation on an almost unimaginable scale; and yet, aside from minor habit changes, like using more public transport and energy-saving light bulbs, we appear largely indifferent. In essence, I believe this is because climate change is not a moral issue. Unlike the oppression of black people, the abuse of children, the denial of rights to gay couples, flying to Paris is not *wrong*. That it contributes to a huge problem we as a species are facing is, surely, undeniable. But it does not equate to a crime. And here's the rub. The main strategy of the green lobby is to attempt to make it just that, an ethical, moral transgression. A sin. It is a sin to drive when you can walk or cycle, a sin to fly when you can take a train (or, better, just stay at home in the first place). Even more confusingly, it is a sin to buy food which comes from far away when it can be grown here. The plethora of ways one can transgress is astonishing, and guilt builds upon guilt until we are burdened by the weight of the problem facing us, constantly wracked with uncertainty over what is and is not permissible.

I submit that this is not only psychologically damaging and practically unlikely to solve the immensity of the problem, it fundamentally distracts from the real causes and agents of change. What drives climate change, at least from the perspective of human involvement, is the increasing amount of carbon dioxide released into the environment. What drives this growth in emissions is our vastly accelerating patterns of consumption. These patterns cannot be addressed in a purely personal way; they are embedded in political and economic structures that are literally dependent on, live by excessive and rampant growth. Neo-liberal capital breathes in this way, the honeyed blood pumping its heart is our desire, real and artificial. The need to burn more coal and oil to build more televisions and iPods requires our complicity, and so it creates it. The move then to rid ourselves of desire, a spiritual move if ever there was one, cannot be a bad thing, and I do not underestimate its importance. But the crucial point is that it leaves the machinery intact. You may not shed your blood for the cause, but there will be plenty of others, rightly or wrongly, who will. Capitalism's enduring strength is its voraciousness, its ability to move with such apparent effortlessness from one person to another, one place to another, one market to another.

Capitalism, of course, is an abstraction. It is how we talk about the particular arrangement of businesses, corporations, governments, laws, and money which currently dominates the way the world works, literally, and the way it trades. And it is here that I believe something of the solution reveals itself, for unlike the amoral issues of driving a car or leaving a light on, the institutions and structures of capitalism are dripping with guilt; nameable, attributable, exposable guilt. Off-shore tax havens, third world debt systems, trade laws which sanction the theft of resources by the global north from the global south, undemocratic institutions given powers to force poor countries to liberalise their trade at the expense of improving public services. I could go on. The list is longer than my arm.

It is a relatively small, in fact, extremely small number of individuals who benefit from the present arrangements; the rest of us are bought off with lifestyles which are comfortable enough, and the media feed us such a steady diet of low fibre-high sugar treats that we either don't notice the disparities, or if we do, we spend insufficient time and energy assessing why they exist. When I

say 'we' I am still talking of a relatively small number of people, those of us fortunate enough to live comfortable lives, with expendable income. Many, many more, thanks to the ravages of the very institutions and corporations of which I spoke earlier, cannot afford such luxuries; and the prevalence of oversimplistic journalism and stereotyping on television and in the cinema helps to prevent any real understanding, or indeed connection between us.

Faced with such a situation, it seems naïve to me to suggest that the answer to our crisis of consumption rests merely, or primarily, with personal lifestyle choices; if you will, personal salvation. I find myself falling in with the Latin American liberation theologians once again. As Gutierrez et al demonstrated, with their critiques and their lives, personal commitments cannot be abstracted from the political contexts in which they are made; change comes when the combination of the two fundamentally undermines the 'powers' that be. In the case of climate change, ridding ourselves of desires, of the need for constant accumulation is necessary, but only as a corollary to challenging the structures which help to create those desires in the first place.

This does not lead us to a simple, articulable solution. But it does drive the discussion away from the obsession with individual or communal guilt over personal choices, which is exactly where the capitalist institutions would like it to remain, and into the open territory of genuine moral reflection over how we trade, how we understand democracy, what we think of fairness. And unlike the present convoluted attempt to create a new ten commandments for ethical living which prohibit essentially amoral choices such as flying or driving or owning a house, we can engage with the struggles of undermining the freedom of capital to move around the world devoid of responsibility or ethics. To press for the implementation of Kyoto or similar protocols in itself is futile. Kyoto will not work because it presupposes a world shaped around, and dictated to, by the demands of capital, and thereby of consumption.

It should, at the end, be noted that such an approach will be difficult. Those with much to lose will fight, and fight dirty. They own the newspapers, and have the ears of the politicians. We need to be educated, connected, and creative.

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