

Reducing Production: An Unfolding Goal

by Don Fitz

The question is not **should** we advocate reducing production within capitalist society but rather: How do we best relate to those struggles that are **already occurring**? Activists across the globe are challenging the uncontrollable dynamic of economic expansion which threatens the survival of humanity. It has never been more urgent to provide a vision of a new society that can pull these efforts together.

Climate change is justifiably the focus of concern in the early 21st century. The Earth is approaching the level of 450 parts per million (ppm) of atmospheric carbon, a level which must be averted if humans are to avoid a cataclysmic turning point when climate change will loop into itself and increase even without additional industrial activity. Sanity dictates that humanity do everything in its power to roll back carbon levels to at least 350 ppm.

Yet corporate politicians shriek blindly that the only solution to economic crisis is increasing production. Incessant economic growth is causing an extinction rate unseen since the last huge meteor hit Earth. It is not limited to terrestrial Life—oceanic Life is threatened by acidification.

Massive industrial production spews toxic poisons that unravel mammalian existence. Since World War II, over 100,000 new chemical compounds have been introduced. Despite Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima, mountains of radioactive waste continue to climb, waiting for the day that they will cease to provide any electricity but will poison Life for eternity.

“Peak everything” began with an understanding that it is not only oil but also coal and gas that are finite. Those who now write of “peak soil” refer to essentially the same concept that Karl Marx and even writers before him saw occurring. [1] Virtually every struggle over resource extraction is intertwined with “peak water” which is now threatening the lives of millions. Only a few years ago, very few had heard of “fracking” and “tar sands,” which now symbolize how the greed for raw materials pushes capitalism into increasingly destructive ventures.

Despite the centrality of growth in destroying the biology of existence, progressives often throw up a variety of objections to opposing economic expansion:

1. Reducing production would supposedly worsen the lives of working people.
2. The degrowth movement began with bourgeois liberals.
3. Since degrowth cannot occur within capitalism, discussing it should wait until “after the revolution.”
4. The concept of producing less is too abstract to build a movement around.

5. An anti-growth movement would easily be co-opted.

Let’s look at each of these.

1. Does lowering production mean a worse quality of life?

Most economic writers, even socialist ones, still seem to believe that there is a strong connection between production and consumption. Linking the words in the phrase “production and consumption” implies that they are two parts of the same process. Enormous changes during the twentieth century profoundly weakened the bond between them.

In 1880, Frederick Engels wrote:

The possibility of securing for every member of society, by socialized production, an existence not only fully sufficient materially, and becoming day by day more full, but an existence guaranteeing to all the free development and exer-

cise of their physical and mental faculties—this possibility is now for the first time here, but *it is here*. [2, Emphasis in original]

But capitalism would not stop expanding merely because it had the potential to meet human needs. Over a century later, Robert Bryce noted:

In 1913, America’s gross domestic product [GDP] was about \$39 billion. By 2005, U.S. GDP was more than \$12.4 trillion or about 300 times as much as the 1913 figure. Thus, in a remarkable

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parallel, that 300-fold increase in oil imports has been accompanied by a 300-fold increase in America’s economic output. [3]

How did corporations manage to continue an enormous increase in production well after the ability to meet human needs had been reached? In 1929, President Herbert Hoover’s Committee on Recent Economic Changes announced its conceptual breakthrough: Capitalism could be saved via the manufacture of artificial needs. The era of planned obsolescence would soon be born. [4]

André Gorz describes in great detail capitalism’s designing a “material environment” of consumption. Instead of demand for needs directing

supply, capitalism now creates a “subject for the object,” or consumer demands for whatever corporations want to sell. [5]

Modern Western existence rests atop a mountain of commodities that play no role whatsoever in making our lives better but do, in fact, threaten the biology of our existence. [6] Unnecessary consumer purchases caused by fabricated desires for electronic gadgets and in-style fashions create massive waste. But consumer choices are barely the tip of the iceberg of unnecessary and destructive production.

No one eats bombs for breakfast, and Americans never get to vote on the unending stream of wars and military bases which pervade the globe. Yet, this accounts for up to 15% of the US GDP. [7]

The vast majority of economic waste occurs during production processes over which workers and consumers have little to no control. Up to 85% of the energy embodied in homes is due to heating and cooling systems. For decades, we have known how to build comfortable homes without furnaces; yet architects continue to design as if there were no tomorrow. For decades, we have known how to plan walkable neighborhoods that would allow over 80% of trips to be made by bike and foot; but city planners continue to act as if adding some “green” trifling to a project has a serious impact on climate change.

The simultaneous growth of starvation and obesity is the hallmark of a food industry where the production of a speck of nutritious food is dwarfed by the gargantuan resources devoted to chemicalizing, processing, packaging, preserving, transporting, marketing, sugarizing, genetically modifying, discarding from grocery shelves and convincing people that they need to eat meat three times a day.

It is similar with medicine. Why does Cuba spend 4% of what the US does for each citizen’s health care when both have the same life expectancy of 78.0 years? It is much more than the 30% overhead of insurance companies. It is also because of the huge amount of over-treatment by a profit-driven industry, under-treating patients whose illnesses get worse, creation of illnesses and treatments, exposure of patients to contagion through over-hospitalization and disease-oriented instead of prevention-oriented research. [8]

A strong connection between production and consumption has characterized previous epochs of human existence. But no longer. Capitalism is now producing an ever greater quantity of things while a decreasing proportion of what is produced actually satisfies human needs. Since the vast majority of what is produced by capitalism is useless or harmful, it is now possible to (1) increase the manufacture of necessary goods, and simultaneously (2) decrease the total volume of production.

2. Babies, bathwater and bourgeois liberalism

It is not unusual for the degrowth movement to be rejected for being based in the liberal ideology of personal life style changes. But people sometimes make brilliant observations even when their overall world view leaves a lot to be desired. Pointing to the philosophical weaknesses of those advocating degrowth does not disprove their concept that the global economy must shrink in order to prevent environmental disaster.

An example of such a great thinker is Ted Trainer, who does a remarkable job of debunking the fantasy that solar and wind power could ever sustain an economy of infinite growth. Unfortunately, he advocates retreating into alternative communities which practice the “Simpler Way” and emphatically rejects class (or any form of) struggle. [9]

Even if millions were to “plunge into the Transition Towns movement” in order to “build things like community gardens, farmers markets, skill banks, etc.” it would barely scratch the surface of destructive activities of capitalism. [10] My backyard garden has no effect on the quantity of nuclear warheads produced or the design of urban transportation systems or the way small farmers are pushed off their land by agribusiness. The only possible outcome of a mass march to Transition Towns

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would be helping the 1% extract yet more wealth from those participating in the agricultural exodus.

Leninists often heap scorn on the very idea of shrinking the economy, citing what Marx would call the “idealism” of approaches such as Transition Towns. Many object to fracking, tar sands extraction, and deep sea oil drilling, not from an understanding that they are inherently dangerous, but from a belief that they are dangerous only when done for profit. But workers control of production will not prevent the expansion of land use from causing species extinction. Nor will it render uranium non-deadly.

This indifference toward the material basis of ecological existence and hostility towards obvious truths espoused by liberal authors is very different from Marx’s approach to Hegel. As Engels wrote, “That the Hegelian system did not solve the problem it propounded is here immaterial. Its epoch-making merit was that it propounded the problem.” [11] If Marx had refused to learn from Hegel because of his idealism, Marx never would have turned Hegel on his head to conceptualize dialectical materialism.

Even more to the point is Engels' treatment of "the three great Utopians" (Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen) in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Engels praises the contributions of each, paying particular homage to Owen:

Every social movement, every real advance in England on behalf of the workers links itself on to the name of Robert Owen. He forced through in 1819, after five years' fighting, the first law limiting the hours of labor of women and children in factories. He was president of the first Congress at which all the Trade Unions of England united in a single great trade association. [12]

Before delving into scientific socialism, Engels rakes all three across the coals, explaining that "To all of these socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and has only to be discovered to conquer the world by virtue of its own power." [13] Engels held onto their goal of socialism while throwing out their method of utopian idealism.

3. Waiting until "after the revolution"

In contrast to those who fail to recognize the need to reduce the total volume of production, John Bellamy Foster suffers no confusion about the need not merely to slow down but to reverse the trends of

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capitalism. [14] His quarrel is not with the goal of reducing the enormous waste of capitalism but with the pathetic inability of "green technology" to accomplish this, and even more so, the failure of "de-growth" theorists to come to grips with the relentless drive for capital to expand. Foster observes that a movement to lower the volume of production must deal with the current crisis of unemployment, advance an alliance with workers, and address structural challenges faced by the global South.

But Foster could be used to support either of two answers to the critical question: "Should we work to lower production while living in capitalist society?" On one hand, his title "Capitalism and degrowth: An impossibility theorem" can be interpreted as implying "No, it is diversionary to work for what obviously cannot be obtained" (a sustained decrease in the mass of production over an extended period of time within capitalism). On the other hand, he advocates a "co-revolutionary movement" which would synthesize struggles of labor, anti-imperialism, social domination and ecology (anti-growth).

The importance of developing such a synthesis cannot be overemphasized, especially for those who believe it is counterproductive to advocate (or even discuss) reducing production. Being unable to attain

a goal within capitalist society is no reason to refrain from advocating it.

Ever since the beginning of the labor movement, capitalists have sought to divide workers by ethnicity and gender. Despite enormous advances, it is not possible to eliminate either racism or sexism within a mode of production that feeds on maximizing of profit by dividing the labor force against itself. But it would be hard to find progressives who would abstain from these struggles because they cannot be won until "after the revolution." Quite the opposite: A social movement changes consciousness and the new awareness of oppression plants the seeds for fully overcoming it in a post-capitalist society.

Similarly with imperialism. One of the greatest consciousness-altering epochs in US history was opposition to the Vietnam War. Though a mass movement forced an end to that war, US imperialism was hardly abolished. Lenin explained in great detail how capitalism without imperialism would have been an impossibility theorem—imperialism had become the epoch of capitalism when finance capital reigned supreme. Indeed, Lenin railed against those socialists who saw imperialism as a bad policy of one group of parliamentarians. He thoroughly denounced Kautsky for suggesting that "imperialism is not modern capitalism. It is only one of the forms of policy of modern capitalism. This policy we can and should fight..." [15]

Imperialism is economic growth uncorked. Lenin saw that the merging of finance and industrial capital pushed the economic system beyond its national boundaries and forced it into other countries to increase the rate of accumulation:

The more capitalism develops, the more the need for raw materials arises, the more bitter competition becomes, and the more feverishly the hunt for raw materials proceeds all over the world, the more desperate becomes the struggle for the acquisition of colonies. [16]

Opposing imperialism can only be successful if anti-war campaigns become efforts to create a new society. Realizing the possibility of one type of struggle becoming a much larger one was the reason that Lenin was so intolerant of those socialists who argued that imperialism could be ended simply by persuading politicians to do the right thing.

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To state the obvious: Lenin did not use his understanding of the inherent link between capitalism and imperialism to conclude that it was pointless to oppose imperialism as long as capitalism existed. The ravages of wanton growth are leading an entire generation of environmental activists to see the intrinsically destructive nature of capitalism. Sadly, many who call themselves "Leninists" are among

the last to understand the centrality of ecology for a revolutionary world view.

Imperialism and economic growth are both manifestations of the same phenomenon—the irresistible urge of capitalism to expand after basic needs have been met. Refusal to oppose growth makes no more sense than refusal to oppose imperialism. If “attainability” within capitalist society were a litmus test for supporting a movement, then virtually all progressive movements would be a waste of time.

4. Motion against growth is not an abstraction

European fur traders documented some of the first resistance to growth in North Americans. They were quite annoyed with Native Americans who would trap only the amount needed to purchase needed goods such as knives and cooking pots. Then they would stop trapping, since they had no interest in unbridled accumulation.

Fast forward several centuries. The brilliant movie *Story of Stuff* mirrors the massive awareness that life is not made better by throw-away junk and never-ending style changes. Everyone who has ever gone into a rant after being forced to make a pointless computer upgrade has expressed an awareness, at some level, of the idiocy of growth beyond reason. The old environmental truism “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” gave way to the newer, unspoken version: “Recycle first, Reuse on rare occasion, and Never discuss reduction.” Recycling has become the corporate means of co-opting the gut level hostility to

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planned obsolescence.

That hostility is intense toward the extractive industries. At the core of accumulating capital is ripping trees off the land, minerals from beneath the surface, and water from everywhere. For hundreds of years, individuals have observed the massive destructiveness of logging—from building ships for the Roman empire to constructing the housing bubble. Recent decades have seen opposition grow as fast as growth itself, whether to save the last 5% of US redwoods or to protect indigenous lands in South America and Asia.

Realization that tar sands extraction may create the tipping point for climate change has lead thousands into the streets opposing the Alberta pipelines. Many more thousands have marched, often fought and not infrequently died in battles in the global South to protect their land and communities from mining gold, silver, diamonds, and coltan, to men-

tion a very few. The fight of the Ogoni against collusion between the Nigerian government and Shell is just one of many conflicts over oil extraction.

Industrial processes require water. Manufacture of a single car requires 350,000 liters. Water is now being pumped out of aquifers at 15 times the rate it soaks into them.

Lakes are being drained and/or hopelessly contaminated. [17] When visiting Lima in December 2010, the first newspaper I ran across had a lead story documenting 250 ongoing conflicts across Peru by people seeking to protect their water supplies from contamination. [18]

Yes, indeed, there is a strong connection between imperialism and the growth economy. Imperialism and wasteful production are two sides of a corporate economy that is compelled to grow, regardless of what individual stockholders and politicians desire. Global domination is the way that corporations obtain materials to produce mountains of useless and destructive junk. Marching against endless wars to corner the market on raw materials means marching (consciously or unconsciously) against economic growth.

5. Stopping co-option by making the connections

Foster very effectively demonstrates the fallacies of Latouche, who “tries to draw a distinction between the degrowth project and the socialist critique of capitalism.” [19] Degrowth theory is weakened every time one of its advocates seeks to show that shrinking the economy is totally compatible with a market economy. This was certainly true of Herman Daly, a major prophet of the theory of a steady-state economy. [20]

Does this liberalism of many supporters make the concept of shrinking the economy in any way unique? In fact, capitalism has massive experience corrupting liberation movements. Twisting idealistic desires to improve the environment into behavior that contributes to environmental destruction is no exception.

This is blatantly the case for energy-saving gadgets. For over 150 years, we have known of the Jeavons Paradox—that increases in energy efficiency tend to be followed by increased energy use. Infatuation with energy efficient homes, cars, hair dryers and such actually helps corporations increase their sales, which results in energy use going up, not down. Advocates of energy efficiency are actually encouraging the expanded use of energy.

Anyone who has ever challenged an incinerator, landfill, toxic manufacture or extraction industry has confronted the danger of stagnating in the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) mentality. Politicians are quick to suggest that victims can save themselves by backing efforts to dump the toxic threat on some other community with less power. The critical factor becomes consciousness-linking: explaining that the social and ecological destruction dictated by the economics of growth cannot be resolved by pushing the

problem off to another location or to future generations.

The struggle for a shorter workday is an integral part of any effort to shrink production. But capitalism has long since figured out how to transform it into a tool for maintaining or even increasing production. Liberals often argue that being at the job for fewer hours can invigorate workers to produce the same amount in less time. Speeding up an assembly line faster or putting 20 students in a class instead of 15 both increase the rate of exploitation.

Even if bosses were to grant the same pay for fewer hours of work (such as “30 for 40”) they could cut social wages (free parks and roads, education, Social Security, Medicare). And/or they could increase the rate of inflation, diminishing what workers could buy with that pay for 40 hours.

Most important, they could increase the rate of planned obsolescence, thereby decreasing the durability of goods and forcing more purchases. Corporate countermeasures illustrate that the same process (fewer hours of work) can have opposite effects, depending on whether it is part of a movement that accepts capitalism or is part of a revolutionary project to replace it.

No rational person would oppose shutting down toxic facilities, shortening the work day, expanding health care to the poorest areas of the globe, or using technology which requires less energy. Yet, capitalism can pretend to grant each of these demands in a way that distorts the true goals of its proponents.

That capitalism could only grant a reduction of production in the most negative way does not make this demand distinctive. It verifies the desire of capitalism to transform any movement into its opposite. The central issue is how to keep a worthwhile goal from being perverted by capitalism. This can be accomplished only if the movement expands its focus from a particular struggle into a universal struggle for human liberation.

There is nothing that strikes to the heart of capitalism more than confronting its primal urge to grow. A failure to identify the culprit as capitalist growth is the major limitation of liberal movements to halt climate change, protect biodiversity, guard communities from toxins and preserve natural resources. Rather than being dismissive toward ongoing struggles against growth, socialists should enthusiastically participate and point to their anti-capitalist essence.

It makes no sense to abstain from ongoing challenges to growth with a claim that anti-growth cannot begin tomorrow. Today’s anti-extraction (i.e., anti-growth) conflicts are the most intense they have ever been. If those who stand back from supporting them claim that they wish to build a new society, the society that they would create would be one whose economy grew and grew until it made human existence impossible.

Many who participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement were well aware that the problem is not just opportunities denied the 99% but the active destruction of the planet by the 1%. The great strength of socialists is their grasp of the unique power of labor to create a new society. A movement which merged the enthusiasm of Occupy, the workplace strength of labor, and the understanding that reducing production is essential for preserving human life would be a powerful movement indeed.

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Notes

1. For a discussion of the way Karl Marx approached soil depletion, see John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).
2. Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970). In his footnote (p. 149), Engels attributes this abundance to the 386% growth of production in England between 1814 and 1875.
3. Robert Bryce, *Gusher of Lies* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).
4. J. Kaplan, The gospel of consumption: And the better future we left behind. *Orion Magazine*, May/June, 2008.
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/2962>
5. G.S. Evans, Consumerism in the USA: A nation of junkies? *Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought* No 57, Winter 2012, 23–26.
6. <http://www.storyofstuff.org/movies-all/story-of-stuff/>
7. www.warresistors.org
8. Don Fitz, Eight Reasons US Healthcare Costs 96% More than Cuba’s—With the Same Results. (December 9, 2010).
http://www.alternet.org/health/149090/eight_reasons_us_healthcare_costs_96%25_more_than_cuba%27s_with_the_same_results
9. <http://www.grist.org/>. Ted Trainer, *Renewable Energy Cannot Sustain a Consumer Society*. (The Netherlands: Springer, 2007).
10. Ted Trainer, Renewable energy cannot sustain a consumer society. *Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought* No 48, Winter 2009, 19–22.
11. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 130
12. *Ibid*, 125.
13. *Ibid*, 126.
14. John Bellamy Foster, Capitalism and degrowth: An impossibility theorem. *Monthly Review*, 62 (8), January 2011, 26–33.
15. V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (In *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970). 740.
16. *Ibid*, 732
17. Sam Bozzo, *Blue gold: World water wars*. Purpleturtle Films. (PBS Home Video, 2008).
18. Cynthia Campos & Luis Poma, *El agua de la discordia*. *La Revista de La República*, Lima, December 19, 2010. 9–12.

... the same process can have opposite effects, depending on whether it is part of capitalism or is part of a project to replace it.

19. Foster, Capitalism and degrowth.

20. Herman Daly, Economics in a full world, *Scientific American*, 293 (3), September 2005, 100–107.