

Is King Environmentalism Wearing No Green Clothes?

review by Don Fitz

Green illusions: The dirty secrets of clean energy and the future of environmentalism, by Ozzie Zehner, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2012, 437 pages, \$29.95 ISBN-978-0-8032-3775-9 (paper)

Should a post-capitalist society dedicate itself to using “green” energy or concentrate on using less energy? Environmentalists, trade unionists, and socialists often shout “Green energy!” in unison. Ozzie Zehner says that they could well be barking up the wrong tree.

Zehner’s *Green Illusions* emphasizes that wrong solutions are not “solutions” at all. Though he focuses on shortcomings of reformist environmentalists, his critiques could also apply to many “revolutionary” socialists whose understanding of energy economics can be as empty as that of corporate executives.

A Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, Zehner first appeared on national TV with the hybrid car he designed and built. Then he saw the light. The book is from the point of view of someone whose life work has been understanding a myriad of technical issues but who is able to present them in a way that the non-techie can follow.

The first part of *Green Illusions* portrays the illusions, whacking the regular targets of clean coal, biofuels, nukes, hydrogen and hydropower. The intriguing part of the book starts when he challenges solar cells, saying humanity could never harness the power available because of the huge cost of constructing an infrastructure. He points to mountains of toxic wastes which would be created. Among other problems would be the necessity of using large amounts of fossil fuel to produce the quantity of solar cells that would be in demand.

He notes advantages of wind power, but raises concerns that the best spots have already been taken, meaning that future locations would require many roads into roadless areas. He looks at the life cycle of CO2 in wind mill construction, problems of emergency services when wind is down, storage inefficiency, and details why replacing coal with wind would require a plant with a capacity 18 times as large.

Zehner is no more fond of geothermal since it would require spreading buildings apart. Geothermal would thus undermine the close living required for mass transit.

The second part of *Green Illusions* proposes concrete solutions. Unlike many works which toss out a grab bag of unrelated suggestions, Zehner weaves his ideas together with the theme of better energy being less energy. We need to redesign society so that people are not pushed to use so much energy.

He takes repeated jabs at those environmentalists who make a fetish out of technological fixes and points to the common sense approaches of our

grandparents. For example, he takes a very dim view of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), which he says “adds rather than subtracts.” In the dominant thinking of architects, a green building is one that puts a vast array of green gadgets on top of un-green ones.

The book is full of warnings such as “there is no such thing as a green product” because “the best material consumption is less consumption.” Research showing that Europeans consume less than Americans but are happier reinforces his analysis.

Green Illusions may do the best job of any new book in debunking the faith in green gadgets. Zehner has no love lost on conventional wisdom, which maintains that environmental problems are best solved by the construction of objects. He believes that developing new social relationships are more important than the invention of things.

Nevertheless, Zehner leaves many questions unanswered. Though he advocates massive social changes, he does not suggest how the economy

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could be modified. If the 1% have demonstrated for centuries that corporate competition prevents them from making humane decisions about what commodities to produce, then how else should those decisions be made?

At several points the author implies, but does not clearly state, what might be the fundamental theses for building an environmental society:

1. Reducing CO2 enough to avoid environmental catastrophe requires a massive (not a small) reduction in the use of fossil fuels.
2. Such a reduction in use of fossil fuels requires a large decrease in industrial production.

3. Current capitalist society is so permeated by the production of useless and destructive stuff that it is possible to decrease industrial production simultaneously with an increase in the quality of life globally.

“there is no such thing as a green product”

Stating these ideas clearly is important for dispelling the widespread fantasy that industrial production can continue at the current pace as well as overcoming the dread of harming people by not creating the necessities of life. Any discussion of social reorganization needs to be based on an understanding that the fabrication of obscenely expensive playthings for the super-rich vastly exceeds the wealth that would be required to provide for good lives for everyone on the planet.

Yet, these omissions are mild and could set the stage for a subsequent book. Zehner stands head and shoulders above many who grapple with same issues. They tend to put faith in personal lifestyle changes (see the *Grist* website) or act as if systemic change should not be proposed until “after the revolution.”

Increasingly popular in left circles is a “minimalist/maximalist” approach. In the early twentieth century, European Socialist Parties had a “minimum” program of minor reforms and a “maximum” program of socialism. They ran in elections on their minimum program and the maximum program was delayed until the never-to-be-reached future.

Solar and wind power are today’s “minimum” environmental program. A “maximum” environmental program might critique the horribly wasteful production within capitalist society, hope for the possible arrival of socialism, but have no idea for getting from here to there.

Monthly Review publishes excellent critiques of disastrous production within capitalist society. But it does not offer suggestions for how to move from where we are to where we should be going. It does not make links between active struggles against extractive industries, labor’s goal of a shorter work week and the need for less industrial activity. Instead, the magazine precautions readers against the “impossibility” of reducing production within capitalism.

Options which Zehner advocates may seem like modest reforms. His solutions center on what he calls “downshift-

ing” and include simpler and smaller homes, walkable neighborhoods, getting rid of TV ads aimed at kids, vegetarianism, gender equality, and not looking at GDP for economic strength.

But, taken as a whole, changes like these would result in a massive drop in unnecessary manufacturing, which would strike at the very heart of capitalism. If the ghost of Leon Trotsky were a deep green environmentalist, he might say that a plan for improving the quality of life while decreasing production is one that provides a transition from a minimal program of reforms to the maximum program of creating an ecological society.

Like an increasing number of authors, Zehner is keenly aware of the error of believing that an increase in alternative energy would displace fossil fuels. The corporate plan for energy is to add solar and wind power at the same as the use of fossil fuel expands. Solar and wind power are no more “transi-

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tional” forms of fuel than fracking for gas provides a “bridge” fuel to a clean environment. Zehner repeats: The only clean energy is less energy. And he explains “less energy” not in the goody-goody context of personal life style changes but structural transformations that would be long lasting and significant.

The phrase “King Environmentalism” could portray those organizations that rake in corporate grant money by covering themselves with the verbal clothing of “green energy.” They hope that their Green Clothing hides their reluctance to insist on the elimination of fossil fuels. Unfortunately, many leftists stand shoulder to shoulder with King Environmentalism in being unwilling to state the obvious need to reduce industrial activity.

In ripping the Green Clothing of solar/wind energy off of King Environmentalism, Zehner becomes the boy in the crowd who yells, “The King is naked!” An environmentalism that fails to call for a complete restructuring of the economy is an environmentalism that wears no clothes — it is environmentalism exposed.

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