

Inside the People's Climate March

Save the World, Really?

by Elliot Sperber

Climate change is a scientific fact. The planet is warming, and this warming is anthropogenic — that is, it is caused by people. It is not, however, caused by all people, or by all cultures, equally. Some ways of life are simply more destructive than others. The evidence for this is overwhelming. And as temperatures and sea levels continue to rise, and as glaciers and ice caps continue to melt, we all bear witness to ever new hurricanes, floods, fires, and other disasters. We even have a new term to describe these exigencies: extreme weather events. Famine, disease, war, water insecurity, and other insecurities proliferate. In confronting these, people's tendency to refer to the need to save the world is entirely understandable. In spite of this, however, the idea of saving the world is deeply problematic.

Consistent with the religious, colonial, and imperialistic associations wrapped up in the notion of saving (and salvation — from which the liberal ideas of progress, progressivism, and development derive), this notion contains a fundamentally conservative implication. For, rather than advancing justice or fairness in a critical, meaningful sense, "saving" involves maintaining, conserving, and preserving what already exists. Of course, in employing this expression people do not mean to suggest that they wish to preserve the things that threaten them. Nor do they mean to say that the physical world as such should be saved.

Unless we're discussing large-scale nuclear war, the physical world's existence is not in question. Even if it's soon shrouded in clouds of ammonia, and supports little more than jellyfish, the physical world will persist. No, when people speak of saving the world they are referring to saving a particular type of world. But what type? The type that led to the present ecological crisis? Even if those who speak of saving the world are referring to saving the seed of the future world developing in this one, doesn't saving the world imply destroying other types of worlds as well? No, this rhetoric of saving the world is confused at best. To paraphrase Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, the point is not to save the world. "The point is to change it."

As such, we should ask ourselves what the persistence of this salvific language suggests. While one may be inclined to think that this is some sort of superficial quasi-problem, the prevalence of the term in, among other places, promotions for the September 21, 2014 People's Climate March (which entreated people to "save the world," and to "save everything we love," along with descriptions of itself as "a movement that can save the world") may reflect an orientation less concerned with transforming the world in keeping with the interests of actual justice than it is with organizing society in a manner that

preserves certain privileged ways of life (along with privilege's converse, exploitation and discrimination). At the very least, the use of this type of language reflects a degree of difficulty distinguishing salvation from actual justice and transformation.

How else does one explain the fact that, in the film *Disruption* (which, according to the People's Climate March website, "gives a behind-the-scenes look at a part of the effort to organize the People's Climate March"), the organizer Keya Chatterjee herself proclaims (some 40 minutes in) that "we have to get off of fossil fuels to protect our way of life?"

This assertion leads to as much confusion as it reveals. Just which way of life is Chatterjee referring to? Isn't our way of life the problem that we're supposed to be combating? Or, did she mean something else? Beyond the fact that the march was supported by the Climate Group, whose members include, among

others, BP, Goldman Sachs, and Duke Energy, an examination of the implications of the film's title is revealing.

In what appears to be an instance of ideological affinity, as opposed to mere coincidence, the short film *Disruption* shares its name with a theory from the world of business. As dubious as it is prevalent (especially in tech circles), the theory known as technological disruption, innovative disruption, and simply disruption attempts to explain why businesses succeed and fail. Roundly criticized for flaws including circular reasoning and selective examinations of history, the *New York Times* defines disruption as that which occurs when "fledgling companies use new technology to offer... alternatives to products sold by established players." Like practitioners of technological disruption, the movie *Disruption* advances a similar logic.

Referring repeatedly to "climate disruption," the film's featured speakers, including Chatterjee, Van Jones, the ostensibly anti-capitalist Naomi Klein, Chris Hayes and Bill McKibben, consistently

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argue that the fossil fuel industry must not only be dismantled; they stress that doing so will correct the problems we collectively confront. Presenting climate change as the most significant problem facing humanity (as opposed to recognizing climate change and ecocide as outgrowths of a more deeply rooted exploitative and coercive political-economic system and way of life), the film again and again attributes responsibility for the present crisis to the fossil fuel industry.

To the neglect of all other ecocidal activities (such as the practices of the meat industry, which

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according to some reports account for 51% of greenhouse gases), the film argues solely for the elimination of the fossil fuel industry and its replacement by a green energy industry. Rather than arguing for the replacement of the intrinsically exploitative commodity economy, which harms far more than the environment, green technology is presented as the answer. The purpose of production within a capitalist system — metastatic growth and profit — is not questioned at all. Instead of inquiring as to why our economic system requires so many jobs, many of which cause far more harm than good, in the first place, Van Jones simply apprises us that “many jobs will be available for people building wind turbines.”

Coupled with its unambiguous interest in investing in green technologies, *Disruption*'s single-minded focus on the fossil fuel industry may lead people to suspect that the commitment to environmentalism advanced by the film (and, by extension, that of the People's Climate March) involves pursuing a political-economic strategy in line with the logic of technological disruption described above. In other words, those behind the film appear to be attempting to “disrupt” the fossil fuel industry in order to profit off of “green tech” (such is the logic of disruption, theory and film). Actually, on their website, The Climate Group says this more or less explicitly. Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben, The Climate Group, and other “disrupters,” unlike Flood Wall Street, don't seem interested in disrupting daily life very much at all. Not only was the New York march held on a Sunday, it was designed to end up on marginal 11th Avenue. Advertisements even playfully encouraged marchers to grab brunch before making history. Whether their brunch server was invited to “change history” with the hipsters and bankers is difficult to discern.

All of which is to say, though an economic engine fueled by a clean, green energy source may very well significantly slow down climate change, absent deep structural, systematic transformations, that engine will merely fuel the exploitative political-economic system presently in place — a clean, green exploitative machine is still an exploitative

machine. And a clean, green capitalism is not at all incongruent with high rates of occupational disease, sweatshop labor, sleep deprivation, obesity, stress, food insecurity, housing insecurity, homelessness, mass indebtedness, mass incarceration, and the other systemic problems that arise from a political-economic system that prioritizes exchange-value over use-value. As clean and green as they may become, prisons will still be prisons. And a clean, green military machine would still be a wild misuse of our collective potential.

A particularly problematic aspect of *Disruption*'s narrow treatment of climate change — and the narrow focus of its proposed solution — is the fact that no mention is made of why this economy needs to use such a tremendous amount of energy in the first place. Why, for instance, are people compelled to rush around all the time? Why is it the case that, though US worker productivity has only increased over the past several decades, wages for most, and most people's quality of life, only decreased?

The answer, of course, is that this economy produces goods and services (not to mention scarcity itself) in order to make a profit — the satisfaction of human needs is secondary. In the words of Adam Smith — and other economists, such as Marx — this political economic system produces goods and services for their exchange-value, not for their use-value. The point is to make money, and then to invest this to make more — an orientation that generates a profound conflict of interest.

Food production for profit provides a strong example of this conflict. Instead of leading to the satisfaction of hunger, the production of food for exchange-value, as opposed to use-value, winds up creating food insecurity. The reason for this is straightforward enough. As the amount of food produced increases (as its supply rises), the exchange-value drops. Within such a system, farmers are pun-

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ished, not rewarded, for satisfying needs and providing food. What results is a food production system in which regularly destroying food and creating scarcity to keep up prices is rewarded. Beyond destroying food directly, various subsidies are provided to prevent farmers from growing too much and upsetting the market. Nourishment is hardly a consideration. In such an upside down system, eliminating hunger would destroy the businessperson/farmer, starvation be damned.

This commercialistic logic — in which exchange trumps use, and luxury is valued more highly than necessity — is also clearly illustrated by recent occurrences in the housing market in New York City. As a particular residence for elderly people in Brooklyn saw properties in its neighborhood rise in exchange-value, the landlord (who's primarily a businessperson, after all, motivated by profit) real-

ized that s/he could make a great deal more money by evicting the elderly residents and converting the property into luxury condominiums. Consequently, the elderly tenants were evicted. While this generated considerable public outcry, and was described in the *New York Times* as a particularly egregious instance of immorality, it is nothing less than the logic of the market displaying itself. Luxury housing — which by definition is not necessary, and often isn't even used except as an investment — takes precedence in a commodity economy over necessary housing. Among other things, this is because housing isn't produced for use, but for exchange. This is the principle that regulates our society, produces vast amounts of toxic waste and disease, and precludes the development of an actually just world.

Unfortunately, discussions concerning global warming, climate justice, and the development of alternative fuels are primarily taking place in this general exchange-value-prioritizing context. If green energy (along with other conditions necessary for the well-being of all — such as housing, nutritious food, transportation and communication networks) is not decommodified, and produced for use rather than for exchange, it will only be lorded over by new landlords and masters, and provided to (or withheld

from) consumers, rather than people, for profit, rather than as an end in itself.

As such, instead of the coercive, exploitative, capitalist model that produces food, homes, transportation systems, energy systems, and other human needs for exchange, a critical, emancipatory politics would produce and distribute those conditions necessary for actually egalitarian, democratic social relations for their own sake. Like those political rights we hear so much about, these conditions would be inalienable — not for sale. Rather than creating more work, requiring more jobs (and more occupational disease and pollution, among other harms) the decommodification of society would eliminate the need for so much work, eliminating the need for so many jobs. Freed from being compelled to produce for exchange, according to the dictates of the market, the planet — and humanity as well — could begin to heal. In other words, rather than simply, and simplistically, saving the world that we presently inhabit, justice demands that we fundamentally transform it.

Elliot Sperber is a writer, attorney, and teacher. He lives in New York City, and can be reached at elliott.sperber@gmail.com and on twitter [@elliott_sperber](https://twitter.com/elliott_sperber)

Afterthoughts on Piketty's *Capital*

by David Harvey

Thomas Piketty has written a book called *Capital* that has caused quite a stir. He advocates progressive taxation and a global wealth tax as the only ways to counter the trend towards the creation of a “patrimonial” form of capitalism marked by what he dubs “terrifying” inequalities of wealth and income. He also documents in excruciating and hard to rebut detail how social inequality of both wealth and income has evolved over the last two centuries, with particular emphasis on the role of wealth. He demolishes the widely held view that free-market capitalism spreads the wealth around and is the great bulwark for the defense of individual liberties and freedoms. Free-market capitalism, in the absence of any major redistributive interventions on the part of the state, produces anti-democratic oligarchies. This demonstration has given sustenance to liberal outrage as it drives the *Wall Street Journal* apoplectic.

The book has often been presented as a 21st century substitute for Karl Marx's 19th century work of the same title. Piketty actually denies this was his intention, which is just as well since his is not a book about capital at all. It does not tell us why the crash of 2008 occurred or why it is taking so long for so many people to get out from under the dual

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burdens of prolonged unemployment and millions of houses lost to foreclosure. It does not help us understand why growth is currently so sluggish in the US as opposed to China or why Europe is locked down in a politics of austerity and an economy of stagnation.

What Piketty does show statistically (and we should be indebted to him and his colleagues for this) is that capital has tended throughout its history to produce ever greater levels of inequality. This is, for many of us, hardly news. It was, moreover, exactly Marx's theoretical conclusion in Volume 1 of his version of *Capital*. Piketty fails to note this, which is not surprising since he has since claimed, in the face of accusations in the right wing press that he is a Marxist in disguise, not to have read Marx's *Capital*.

Piketty assembles a lot of data to support his arguments. His account of the differences between income and wealth is persuasive and helpful. And he gives a thoughtful defense of inheritance taxes, progressive taxation and a global wealth tax as possible (though almost certainly not politically viable) antidotes to the further concentration of wealth and power.

But why does this trend towards greater inequality over time occur? From his data (spiced up