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Environmental campaigns

The environmental ravages due to capitalism are well known. They include air and water pollution, land devastated by mining, clearing of land for cash crops, wiping out of species due to commercial exploitation or destruction of habitats, use of dangerous chemicals and radioactive materials, reduction of stratospheric ozone due to aerosol sprays and other products, and climate change due to burning fossil fuels.

The market system does not work well to handle environmental problems, partly because the costs of environmental impacts are seldom included in the costs of production.¹ For example, there is no simple market mechanism to make automobile manufacturers pay for the costs of ill health due to vehicle emissions, traffic accidents, use of land for roads, greenhouse warming or wars fought to ensure access to cheap oil. These costs are borne by members of the public and the environment. So it can be said that the profits are privatised (captured by owners and users) and the environmental and health costs are “socialised” (borne by society as a whole). In economic jargon, environmental costs are said to be “externalities,” namely things external to normal market processes.

There have been extended debates about the cause of environmental problems. One school of thought, whose most prominent exponent is Paul Ehrlich, says that overpopulation is the prime culprit.² Another perspective, championed by Barry Commoner, is that use of new technologies—selected and introduced within a capitalist framework—is the driving force behind environmental assaults: even with the same population, new chemicals, for example, cause more far-reaching impacts.³ Much technological development is motivated by profits, so this perspective attributes much environmental degradation to capitalism.

Another debate is over the relative roles of capitalism and industrialism. State socialist economies such as the former Soviet

Union caused enormous environmental problems, including highly polluting cars, wasteful industrial processes and devastating destruction of habitats such as Lake Baikal.⁴ It is clear that state socialism can be at least as bad for the environment as capitalism, so it is reasonable to argue that the core problem is the cult of modern industry itself and not the economic system in which it grows.

There is also a debate about whether sound environmental practices are compatible with capitalism. In other words, within a capitalist system, is environmental sustainability possible?

While these debates are fascinating, it is not necessary to resolve them for the purposes of discussing nonviolence strategy against capitalism. It is sufficient to note that environmental goals and campaigns often challenge and constrain capitalist development. Indeed, environmentalism has been one of the major sources of challenge to capitalist prerogatives in the past several decades.

- Opponents prevented the creation of a massive fleet of supersonic transport aircraft, limiting production to a few Concordes.
- Campaigns have shut down most of the world's whaling industry.
- Forestry campaigners have opposed unsustainable and damaging forestry operations across the globe.
- Anti-freeway protesters have challenged the expansion of road systems.
- Opponents of nuclear power have stopped the nuclear industry across the world.
- Campaigners have pushed for controls on production of carbon dioxide emissions to prevent global warming.
- Local citizens have stopped innumerable commercial developments.

What is called the "environmental movement" is a complex and varied set of activists, sympathisers, organisations, campaigns and ideas, and might be better described in the plural as "environmental movements." There are powerful international groups such as Greenpeace, numerous national environmental organisations and a host of local groups. There are full-time activists, occasional participants, financial supporters and passive sympathisers. There are individuals and groups that try to live lifestyles with low environmental impact. There is an enormous range of viewpoints among environmental campaigners.

Nonviolent action is widely used by environmentalists. This includes rallies, street theatre, symbolic actions such as dumping nonrecyclable containers on the steps of the manufacturer, blockading shipments of rainforest timbers, sitting in front of bulldozers and occupying development sites. More conventional techniques are also used by environmentalists, including writing letters, giving talks, preparing teaching materials, lobbying, advertising, drafting legislation, making submissions, and suing polluters through the courts. A few environmentalists use sabotage, such as putting spikes in trees that are a target of logging, but always with a strong commitment to avoid harm to humans.

In the immense diversity within the environmental movement, there are some anticapitalist aspects, quite a few that provide no threat to capitalism and some that support capitalism. In the early years of the modern movement, environmental concerns were often portrayed as a middle-class preoccupation, for example to stop a factory or road that would disturb the lifestyle of affluent suburbanites. Left-wing analysts and parties at first derided environmentalism as contrary to the interests of the working class: industry and jobs were considered more important than the side-effects of industrial development.⁵ Belching smokestacks were once seen as a sign of progress. As the years passed, through, left-wing groups joined the environmental bandwagon, seeing it as a means to challenge capitalism. However, as noted earlier, socialist industrialism is not necessarily any better environmentally.

Unlike a traditional left approach, a nonviolence strategy cannot rely on the power of the state to challenge capital, and likewise it cannot rely on state power to solve environmental problems. In order to assess environmental campaigns from a nonviolence perspective, it is helpful to focus on particular environmental issues. Here, three areas are examined: pesticides, nuclear power and local antidevelopment campaigns.

Pesticides

Rachel Carson's famous book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, alerted the world to the dangers of pesticides and was a key stimulus for the formation of the environmental movement.⁶ Pesticides are chemicals designed to kill insects, plants, fungi, and other life that is considered to be undesirable for human purposes, especially agricul-

ture and public health. Supporters argue that pesticides are essential for these purposes whereas critics argue that many uses of pesticides are unnecessary or harmful to the environment and human health. The debate covers issues such as health risks, costs and alternatives.

Manufacture and sale of pesticides is a very large industry. A number of giant multinational chemical corporations, such as Monsanto, produce the bulk of pesticides used worldwide. To greatly reduce pesticide use would be to reduce profits. Hence campaigns against pesticides are definitely a challenge to a significant fraction of capital.

Critics of pesticides, or of their excessive and inappropriate use, have used a variety of methods, including investigation, education, publicity, lobbying, law suits, meetings and promotion of alternatives. Although actions such as strikes and occupations have not been as prominent as on some other environmental issues, a full range of nonviolent actions can readily be used to oppose pesticides and promote alternatives.⁷ A nonviolent campaign against pesticides can be assessed using the check list.

1. Does the campaign help to

- undermine the violent underpinnings of capitalism, or
- undermine the legitimacy of capitalism, or
- build a nonviolent alternative to capitalism?

The answer to this question, applied to antipesticide campaigns, is likely to be “no.” A campaign certainly can challenge the legitimacy of pesticide manufacturers, but this does not necessarily undermine capitalism’s legitimacy generally.

Of course, challenges to pesticides can be extremely valuable even if they do not challenge the capitalist system in any fundamental way.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

This depends on the campaign. Antipesticide campaigns can be participatory—for example involving most members of a local community affected by pesticides—but some lobbying efforts have very low participation.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

Typical goals of antipesticide campaigns are to reduce pesticide use to much lower levels and to promote alternatives. Campaigns against pesticides cannot easily build goals into methods, except in the trivial sense that activists do not use pesticides in their campaigning. On the other hand, promotion of alternatives, such as organic farming practices to reduce pest levels, toleration of higher crop losses and use of biological controls, all have great potential for incorporating ends in means.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

The most effective form of cooption in the pesticide area is government regulation. Regulations on pesticide toxicity, use or distribution appear to deal with problems but easily fail due to lax limits, poor enforcement and negligible penalties for violations. Furthermore, regulations seldom provide much encouragement for alternatives. Therefore, campaigning that is oriented to improving regulation is enmeshed in an official system that doesn't work very well.

The route of promoting alternatives directly also can be coopted, though with much more beneficial results. The practice of organic farming involves elimination of synthetic pesticides. Organic farming can be taken in a collective direction, in which self-reliance, sharing and community solidarity are key elements, and in which control over the process is kept in the hands of the farmers. However, it can also be taken in a commercial direction, in which case organic produce becomes simply another means to make money. Companies can get involved by producing naturally occurring pesticides. Thus organic farming has the potential to be a significant challenge to capitalist agriculture but also can be coopted into the capitalist marketplace. Campaigns around pesticides can push in either direction.

In summary, campaigns against the excessive use of pesticides do not have a great potential for challenging capitalism, though they can be very valuable within themselves. The most anticapitalist direction for antipesticide campaigns is through promoting alternatives, especially in the noncommercial aspects of organic farming movement.

Nuclear power

Nuclear power is the production of electricity by harnessing the process of nuclear fission, using uranium as the fuel. Proponents claim that it is a clean and cheap method of power generation. Critics cite numerous disadvantages, including the hazards of long-lived radioactive wastes, the risk of nuclear reactor accidents, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by more governments (since nuclear power technology and expertise is linked to the capacity to produce nuclear weapons), high costs, the mining of uranium on indigenous people's lands, and reductions in civil liberties due to the need to protect against criminal and terrorist use of nuclear materials.

The first nuclear power plants were built in the 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, nuclear power was well on its way to becoming a major power source, with hundreds of large plants constructed, especially in the United States and Soviet Union.

Unlike pesticides, which have been manufactured primarily by corporations, nuclear power has been a creature of states.⁸ Some of the very earliest plants in Britain and the Soviet Union were designed to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons, with electricity as a by-product. Military research and development, plus government sponsorship, were crucial in getting the nuclear option going. In most countries, nuclear power has been totally owned and controlled by the state, with corporations only involved in a minor fashion. Partly this has been because of links to actual or potential military uses of nuclear materials. As well, in many countries the electricity sector has been government-run. Finally, the huge costs and the risks of catastrophic accidents have discouraged private investment.

Only in the US were corporations involved in a big way in early decades. Even there, the government eased the way through research and development, subsidies (such as through government-funded uranium enrichment facilities) and legal limits on insurance pay-outs in case of nuclear accidents. However, it is possible that nuclear power could have gone down the route of other technologies, such as telecommunications, that were first developed by states, in the risky and expensive trial periods, and later turned over to corporations once commercial viability was more assured. Thus, much of the British nuclear industry was privatised in the 1990s, with the government maintaining ownership of a portion that could not be made profitable.

The movement against nuclear power had its first stirrings in the late 1960s and expanded enormously in the 1970s. It has been a grassroots movement, involving a range of sectors of the population such as farmers in Japan, suburbanites in the US and trade unionists in Australia.⁹ Often the focus has been against nuclear power plants that are proposed or under construction, with opposition drawn from local communities. There has also been substantial opposition even among those far from any immediate risk. In Australia the main antinuclear goal has been to stop uranium mining that is remote from most of the population, and the movement has been as strong as anywhere else.

The movement against nuclear power has used a variety of methods of nonviolent action, including meetings, rallies, vigils, blockades, strikes and site occupations. Nonviolent action theory and training has played a large role in the movement, while in turn the movement has served as a means for spreading and developing understanding of and experience with nonviolent action. This has especially been the case in the United States and Western Europe, where nonviolence was the organising principle for major campaigns, with careful preparation, nonviolent action training, consensus decision making and fostering of nonviolent discipline.¹⁰

While the antinuclear movement has made great use of nonviolent action, to what extent is it anticapitalist? A look at the check list is helpful at this point.

1. Does the campaign help to

- undermine the violent underpinnings of capitalism, or
- undermine the legitimacy of capitalism, or
- build a nonviolent alternative to capitalism?

Since nuclear power has been largely an initiative of states, antinuclear campaigns do not do a lot to undermine the legitimacy of capitalism. However, there is a connection with state violence. A society built around heavy use of nuclear power—the so-called “plutonium economy”—would require an unprecedented level of surveillance and police powers in order to guard against criminal and terrorist use of nuclear materials. Many nuclear power programmes have been accompanied by draconian legislation, special police forces and surveillance of nonviolent nuclear opponents. In a nuclear state, any form of dissent becomes criminalised. It is possible to imagine a

plutonium economy in which commercialisation of the nuclear fuel cycle is made possible by, and gives the rationale for, intensification of the police powers of the state.

The widespread introduction of nuclear power thus could have led to greatly increased state power in the service of capitalism. Antinuclear campaigning helps to prevent such a development, and thus undermines the violent underpinnings of a possible future nuclear capitalism. The case of nuclear power draws attention to the value of stopping capitalism from getting much worse or more deeply entrenched. Thus, although antinuclear campaigning has been largely against the power of the state, it has an anticapitalist dimension, namely prevention of a much more dangerous capitalism, where the danger would come from environmental impacts, nuclear war and attacks on civil liberties.

The movement against nuclear power has been accompanied by a constructive programme, namely promotion of an energy future based around energy efficiency, renewable energy sources (such as solar and wind power) and design of communities and lifestyle changes to reduce energy requirements.¹¹ Some elements of this programme offer an alternative to capitalist approaches, as described below.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

Most of the grassroots antinuclear campaigns have been participatory, with many opportunities for involvement in a variety of ways. Campaigns built around nonviolence principles have made informed participation a priority. On the other hand, participation in some activities has been restricted, such as expert testimony at inquiries and direct actions by Greenpeace.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

While some participants have reform goals, such as building safer nuclear plants, most have opposed any use of nuclear power. An additional goal, sought by many activists, is an energy system that is environmentally sound, self-reliant and decentralised.

For the goal of a world without nuclear power, the methods used have been compatible with the goal in the trivial sense that they do not rely on nuclear power.¹² But most campaigning that is simply

against nuclear power has not gone further in building a positive alternative into methods.

Some campaigns for a “soft energy path” are exemplary for combining means and ends: installation of solar heaters and biogas cookers, promotion of solar design in construction, elimination of wasteful packaging, use of bicycles, and a host of other initiatives. These sorts of campaigns can be tied to opposition to nuclear power as well as opposition to nonrenewable, centralised energy sources including coal, oil and natural gas.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

If antinuclear activists had been satisfied with better safety audits, building nuclear plants underground, or deeper burial of radioactive waste, then campaigns would have been coopted long ago. Nuclear power, since it comes only in the form of large power stations and always brings along other elements in the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium mining, enrichment and waste disposal, presents itself as an all-or-nothing proposition. Most campaigners have demanded the nothing option, making the movement fairly resistant to cooption.

Campaigning for a soft energy future is far more open to cooption. Automobile manufacturers can provide fuel-efficient cars; small companies can install solar hot water heaters; electricity utilities can offer special “green energy” schemes to encourage renewable energy; manufacturers can produce energy-efficient appliances. In short, a more energy-efficient future is compatible with capitalism, though it may not be the most profitable capitalist path. Many people would consider such an energy-efficient capitalism a great improvement. This means that cooption is a strong possibility.

The movement against nuclear power has been remarkably successful in stopping a powerful industrial juggernaut in its tracks, but whether it should be considered an anticapitalist movement is a vexing question, given that nuclear power has largely been a state initiative. To the extent that the nuclear industry might have been privatised with the full advent of a “plutonium economy,” the antinuclear movement has anticapitalist credentials. The movement has been highly participatory and played an important role in increasing the conscious use of nonviolent action.

As a movement *against* a form of technology, the movement has difficulty in incorporating its goals into its methods, but the parallel movement for a self-reliant energy future can be promoted with means-ends compatibility. However, the path to a low energy future is easily susceptible to cooption. So while the antinuclear movement may have stopped nuclear capitalism, the likely alternative is nonnuclear capitalism, which is not nearly as bad but is a far cry from a nonviolent economic system.

It is intriguing to speculate that one reason for the important role of nonviolent action in antinuclear campaigns is the role of the state, and especially of state repression, in promoting the nuclear option. The state has been involved because of the large scale, high costs and great potential risk of nuclear developments. Nuclear power is not a small, user-friendly technology that can be purchased at a local shop. As noted in chapter 2, the theory of nonviolent action applies most easily and obviously in the face of repression by clearly defined “rulers.” Nuclear power fits this model more readily than most technologies.

If nuclear technology had been available in consumer-sized bundles—such as plutonium-powered watches and vehicles—it might well have been accepted more readily, even if it ended up killing millions of people. (A good analogy is cigarettes.) By being large, concentrated, remote, run by large organisations and overtly backed by state power, nuclear power became an ideal target for nonviolent action.

This suggests once again the difficulty of confronting capitalism, in as much as it is a system of dispersed power. A careful analysis is especially important, since obvious points of attack may not get to the roots of the problem.

Local antidevelopment campaigns

When community members organise against a new development, such as a factory, apartment block, housing estate, stadium, freeway, airport, or just the cutting down of a few trees, the motivation is often self-interest, including maintaining property values, preventing noise and air pollution, ensuring nice views, reducing traffic congestion or preventing the “wrong sort of people” from moving into the neighbourhood. Local antidevelopment campaigns are often dubbed with acronym NIMBY, standing for “not in my back yard.” The

implication is that NIMBY campaigners do not care if the development occurs somewhere else. They just do not want it near where they live.

In spite of the derogatory connotations of the term NIMBY, many local activists do care about others. Local campaigning can be especially effective when it combines principled opposition to certain types of harmful development—such as nuclear waste dumps or high temperature incinerators—with concerns about local impacts or racial discrimination. In any case, local campaigns can be a potent mode of resistance to capitalist initiatives. Therefore they are worth considering.

1. Does the campaign help to

- undermine the violent underpinnings of capitalism, or
- undermine the legitimacy of capitalism, or
- build a nonviolent alternative to capitalism?

For most NIMBY campaigns, the answer is no. There may be undermining of the legitimacy of individual capitalists—namely the ones promoting the development being opposed—but seldom of the system as a whole.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

This depends on the campaign. High participation is important for campaign success.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

When, as is typical, the aim is to stop a development and the methods include meetings, letters, lobbying and rallies, there is little direct connection between goals and methods. Often there is, in addition, a more general aim: for local people to make decisions about local developments. One way to capture this general aim in methods is for local community members to develop their own participatory planning processes and to use them to reach agreement on desired plans. An alternative plan is a good way to help challenge an undesired development.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

Cooption is always a serious risk for local antidevelopment campaigns. Sometimes this occurs through compromises: a height of

a proposed building is reduced or better emission controls are installed in a factory. Another method is buying off opposition, as for example when developers pay high prices to purchase existing dwellings targeted for removal. The community as a whole can be bought off when the developer or government allies provide facilities such as parks, pay higher taxes or make donations to schools.

In a wider sense, cooption occurs when developers go somewhere else: the development is not stopped but instead displaced, often to a community that cannot resist as effectively. The result is that undesirable developments often end up in the poorest and most oppressed communities (though effective resistance occurs in some poor communities).

By these criteria, local antidevelopment campaigns are weak vehicles for challenging capitalism, since they provide little fundamental challenge and are easily coopted. However, while this is true of most local campaigns, as a collective phenomenon they should not be ignored. Sometimes a combination of NIMBY campaigns constitutes a strong challenge to a type of development. A good example is disposal of high-level radioactive waste. No community wants to host this particular “development” and cooption strategies have not proved successful. In this case, local opposition results from and provides support to wider antinuclear consciousness built by the movement against nuclear power. Several of the limitations of individual NIMBY campaigns are overcome when they are part of a wider struggle.

Notes

1 K. William Kapp, *The Social Costs of Private Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

2 Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (London: Pan, 1971).

3 Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

4 Boris Komarov, *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union* (London: Pluto, 1981).

5 See, for example, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "A critique of political ecology," *New Left Review*, No. 84, March-April 1974, pp. 3-31; James Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

6 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

7 Carol Van Strum, *A Bitter Fog: Herbicides and Human Rights* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1983).

8 Joseph A. Camilleri, *The State and Nuclear Power: Conflict and Control in the Western World* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1984); André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1980); Robert Jungk, *The New Tyranny: How Nuclear Power Enslaves Us* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1979).

9 Jim Falk, *Global Fission: The Battle over Nuclear Power* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982); Wolfgang Rüdiger, *Anti-Nuclear Movements: A Worldwide Survey of Opposition to Nuclear Energy* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1990).

10 On the US experience see Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

11 For the technical side of this approach, see Amory B. Lovins, *Soft Energy Paths: Toward a Durable Peace* (New York: Ballinger, 1977).

12 Where nuclear power is part of the electricity generating system, it is hard to avoid using some nuclear-produced electricity without disconnecting from the electricity grid. Avoiding this has not been treated as significant in antinuclear campaigning.