

Ecological Politics for the Working Class

Sunday 22 September 2019, by [HUBER Matt T.](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2019).

Solving the ecological crisis requires a mass movement to take on hugely powerful industries. Yet environmentalism's base in the professional-managerial class and focus on consumption has little chance of attracting working-class support. This article argues for a program that tackles the ecological crisis by organizing around working-class interests.

The climate and ecological crisis is dire and there's little time to address it. In just over a generation (since 1988), we have emitted *half* of all historic emissions. [1] In this same period the carbon load in the atmosphere has risen from around 350 parts per million to over 410 — the highest level in 800,000 years (the historic preindustrial average was around 278). [2] Human civilization only emerged in a *rare* 12,000 year period of climate stability — this period of stability is ending fast. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report suggests we have a mere twelve years to drastically lower emissions to avoid 1.5 C warming — a level that will only dramatically increase the spikes in extreme superstorms, droughts, wildfires, and deadly heat waves (to say nothing of sea-level rise). [3] New studies show changing rainfall patterns will threaten grain production like wheat, corn, and rice within twenty years. [4] A series of three studies suggest as early as 2070, half a billion people will, “experience humid heat waves that will kill even healthy people in the shade within 6 hours.” [5]

You don't have to be a socialist to believe the time frame of the required changes will necessitate a revolution of sorts. The IPCC flatly said we must immediately institute “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.” [6] The noted climate scientist Kevin Anderson said, “... when you really look at the numbers behind the report, look at the numbers the science comes out with, then we're talking about a complete revolution in our energy system. And that is going to beg very fundamental questions about how we run our economies.” [7]

The radical climate movement has long coalesced around the slogan “system change, not climate change.” The movement has a good understanding that capitalism is the main barrier to solving the climate crisis. Yet sometimes the notion of “system change” is vague on *how* systems change. The dilemma of the climate crisis is not as simple as just replacing one system with another — it requires a confrontation with some of the wealthiest and most powerful sectors of capital in world history. This includes a mere 100 companies responsible for 71 percent of the emissions since 1988. [8] The fossil fuel industry and other carbon-intensive sectors of capital (steel, chemicals, cement, etc.) will not sit by and allow the revolutionary changes that make their business models obsolete.

Like all other such battles, this confrontation will take a highly organized social movement with a mass base behind it to force capital and the state to bend to the changes needed. Yet, as Naomi Klein argues, this is really “bad timing” because over the last several decades it is capital who has built formidable power to neutralize their main challenges like a regulatory state, progressive tax structures, and viable trade unions. [9] The history of the nineteenth and twentieth century shows that the largest challenge to the rule of capital has come from organized working-class movements grounded in what Adaner Usmani calls “disruptive capacity” — particularly strikes and union organizing. [10] It is the working class that not only constitutes the vast majority of society, but also

has the strategic leverage to shut down capital's profits from the inside. [11]

Yet, herein lies the main dilemma. A movement up to the task of bringing about the changes needed will not only have to be massive in size, but have a substantial base in the working class. In its current form, however, environmental politics has little chance of succeeding in this. Its ideological and strategic orientation reflects the worldview of what Barbara and John Ehrenreich called the "professional managerial class" that centers educational credentials and "knowledge" of the reality of environmental crisis at its core. [12] This is not simply a problem of the kind of people involved. Middle-class environmental politics is often directly antagonistic to working-class interests. It grounds its theories of ecological responsibility in ideas of "ecological" or "carbon" footprints that blame consumers (and workers) for driving ecological degradation. This approach centers on the appeal that we need to live simply and "consume less" — a recommendation that is hardly likely to appeal to a working class whose wages and living standards have stagnated for almost two generations. [13] When seeking examples of emancipatory environmental politics, radical academics imagine real environmental politics as a form of direct livelihood struggles over natural "use values" like land, resources, and the body itself. While livelihood struggles are very important, professional-class environmentalism sidesteps how such a politics could appeal to the tens of millions of workers who do not directly access nature in "use value" form. In this essay, I argue for *a working-class ecological politics* [14] aimed at mobilizing the mass of workers to confront the source of the crisis — capital. In order to build this kind of politics, we need to appeal to the mass of the working class who has no ecological means of survival apart from access to money and commodities. This politics centers on two major planks. First, it offers a much different story of *class responsibility* for the ecological crisis. Rather than blame "all of us" consumers and our footprints, it aims its focus on the capitalist class. This kind of politics can channel already existing anger and resentment workers have toward their boss and the wealthy in general to explain yet one more reason why those antagonists are making their lives worse.

Second, it offers a political program meant to directly appeal to the material interest of the working class. It is relatively straightforward to insert ecologically beneficial policies within the already existing movements around the decommodification of basic needs like "Medicare for All" or "Housing for All." The climate crisis in particular is centered upon sectors absolutely vital to working-class life — food, energy, transport. The goal should be to use this scientifically declared emergency to build a movement to take these critical sectors under public ownership to at once decarbonize and decommodify them. The emergent politics of the Green New Deal, although far from perfect, does exactly this. It not only offers a solution at the scale of the problem — aiming to revolutionize the energy and economic system — but also offers clear and direct benefits to the mass of the working class (e.g., a federal job guarantee). Although there is much consternation about the anti-environmentalism amongst established building trade unions and fossil fuel industrial workers, a working-class environmentalism could better align with rising militancy in more low-carbon care sectors like health and education. These campaigns' focus on anti-austerity politics and "bargaining for the common good" can also address the expansion of a public response to ecological breakdown. [15]

Part 1. From Lifestyle to Livelihood: The Limits of Environmentalism

The environmental movement in its current form is dominated by middle-class professionals. Along with the expansion of higher education, this class exploded during the post-WWII boom — itself a product of mass working-class struggle and union victories in the 1930s and 1940s. Out of these historical conditions emerges what I will call "lifestyle environmentalism," the essence of which is to seek better outcomes through individual consumer choices. [16] Yet this desire comes from a deeper source of anxiety about the forms of mass commodity consumption wherein middle-class security is equated with a private home, automobile, meat consumption, and a whole set of resource- and

energy-intensive commodities. As such, lifestyle environmentalism sees modern lifestyles — or what is sometimes called “our way of life” [17] — as the primary driver of ecological problems. This, of course, makes a politics of material gains inherently ecologically damaging. Since lifestyle environmentalism blames commodity consumption — and the vast majority of society (i.e., the working class) depends on commodities for survival — it only appeals to a very narrow base of affluent people who not only live relatively comfortable middle-class lives but simultaneously feel guilty doing so. Under neoliberalism especially, the bulk of the population does not feel guilty or complicit in their consumption, but constrained by severe limits on access to the basics of survival.

Lifestyle environmentalism also produces an offshoot, a distinct and seemingly more radical alternative vision of ecological politics prevalent in academic scholarship. This form of scholarship *accepts* the premise of lifestyle environmentalism that modern “consumer lifestyles” are inherently damaging to the environment. As such, radical ecological scholars look to the margins of society for a more authentic basis for environmental politics. This is what I will call “livelihood environmentalism,” [18] or what is sometimes called “the environmentalism of the poor.” [19] This form of scholarship argued the proper basis for environmental mobilization was a direct lived experience of the environment. I will cover two critical fields. First, *political ecology* broadly seeks examples of struggles over direct “use value” reliance upon land or resources for subsistence among often peasant, indigenous, or other marginalized communities (usually in the Global South). As such, this scholarship often romanticizes what are seen as anti-modern subsistence livelihoods on the margins of global capitalism. Second, *environmental justice* focuses more on the uneven effects of pollution and toxic waste as deadly threats to livelihood in racialized marginalized communities (usually in the Global North). Often critical of mainstream environmentalism’s focus on wilderness or wildlife preservation, environmental justice scholars bring to light how poor and racially marginalized communities make “environment” a question of survival. Yet, again, those struggling directly against the poisoning of local communities are often on the margins of society as a whole. Struggles like this (e.g., the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil or the struggle for clean water in Flint, Michigan) are obviously important matters of survival for those involved. Yet the strategic question of how to translate local livelihood concerns into a broader mass environmental movement able to take on capital remains unclear.

Livelihood environmentalism is often seen as the opposite of lifestyle environmentalism, but its academic focus emerges from the foundations of the latter. It is the disaffection with the mass commodity society that sends the radical academic’s gaze to the margins of society looking for “real” environmental struggle. Livelihood environmentalism is indeed a much more attractive form of politics rooted in the material interests of specific groups. By fetishizing the direct lived relation to what is seen as the real environment (land, resources, pollution), it sidesteps how we might build an environmental politics for the majority of society already dispossessed of land and dependent on money and commodities for survival.

THE ECOLOGICAL FALLACIES OF LIFESTYLE ENVIRONMENTALISM

Lifestyle environmentalism takes *life* seriously. Ecology is the study of life in all its relations. To trace environmental problems back to consumer lifestyles, ecologists developed sophisticated technical tools. They were based on a core premise:

Every organism, be it bacterium, whale or person, has an impact on the earth. We all rely upon the products and services of nature, both to supply us with raw materials and to assimilate our wastes. The impact we have on our environment is related to the “quantity” of nature that we use or “appropriate” to sustain our consumption patterns. [20]

These are the opening lines of an early introductory text to “ecological footprint” analysis, *Sharing Nature’s Interest*. Every year thousands of undergraduates and environmental activists take the “ecological footprint” quiz to learn how many planets it would require to sustain the planet’s 7+ billion people consuming like you (usually some startling number like 3.5 Earths). Through such knowledge and tools, consumers in the Global North learned that their “privilege” and complicity was largely responsible for a global ecological crisis.

The quote lays out the ecological worldview nicely: humans are an *organism* like any other. Every “organism” has measurable “impacts” on an ecosystem. Bears eat fish, and humans eat fish tacos, but the results on an ecosystem are the same. Importantly, ecological footprint analysis seeks to link impacts to consumption. This makes sense within the ecological worldview. After all, any ecologist knows an ecosystem is made up of producers and consumers. These are quite different than producers and consumers in a capitalist economy. Ecological producers are the plants that harness solar power and water to produce organic plant matter at the base of any “food web.” However, the real action — and the “impacts” — comes from ecological *consumers*. These are the animals and other species who consume plants and the animals who consume those animals and so on. The consumers — and there are many levels of primary, secondary, and so on — are the drivers of ecological change in a system where producers are relatively inert and passive (they are actually called “autotrophs”).

An ecological footprint can take the input of your various economic consumptive activity (the energy, food, housing, and other materials that make up your daily consumption) and give you an output of how much ecological space — or, “equivalent biologically productive area” [21] — is required to support this consumption. This allows for an understanding of inequality rooted in income and consumption levels: the US consumes 9.6 hectares per capita while India consumes 1 hectare per capita. This broad ecological footprint analysis has been supplanted recently with “carbon footprints.” Instead of measuring your impact in terms of “space,” now consumers learn in terms of pounds (or tons) of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (the average American consumer emits roughly 37,000 pounds per year).

This can lead to a kind of “progressive” analysis of the inequality of footprints between rich and poor consumers. In 2015, Oxfam released a report entitled “Extreme Carbon Inequality” that found the top 10 percent of people in the world are responsible for 50 percent of emissions while the bottom 50 percent are only responsible for 10 percent. [22] The abstract announces the project in terms of “Comparing the average lifestyle consumption footprints of richer and poorer citizens in a range of countries.” [23] Here again emissions are attached to “lifestyle”; the way we live generates emissions that are our own individual responsibility. In fact, the study asserts that 64 percent of total emissions are wholly attributable to “consumption” whereas the remainder is vaguely ascribed to “governments, investments (e.g. in infrastructure) and international transport.” [24]

Yet the question becomes: is an individual consumer’s “footprint” all their own? The difference between humans and other organisms is that no other organism monopolizes the means of production and forces some of those organisms to work for money. If we saw a bear privatize the means of fish production and force other bears to work for them, we would immediately conclude something had gone wrong in this ecosystem. But this is what humans do to other human organisms. Humans organize access to resources (and consumption) via *class systems* of control and exclusion.

Footprint analyses are not only shaped by an ecological vision of “all humans are simply organism-consumers” — but also a more hegemonic *economic theory* that suggests it is consumers who drive the economy with their choices and decisions. The theory of consumer sovereignty assumes that producers are captive to the demands of consumers, indeed that they are simply responding to the latter — rather than what is in fact the case: production constrains consumption choices. Much

consumption (like driving) is not a “choice” but a necessity of social reproduction (getting to work). Moreover, when we choose commodities, we can only choose those that are *profitable* to produce in the first place. A contradiction of “environmentally sustainable” commodities (with lower footprints) is they are often more expensive.

The real question one must ask is: who do we believe has the *real power* over society’s economic resources? Consumer sovereignty theory suggests it is consumer preferences that ultimately drive production decisions — power is *diffuse* and scattered amongst individual consumers. But in fact, power over the economy is not diffuse, but *concentrated* in the hands of those who control productive resources. Footprint ideology internalizes the former view of diffused consumer power. One leading analyst of carbon inequality, Kevin Ummel, reveals this is exactly how he imagines the causal relationship: “The goal is to trace emissions back to the household consumption choices that ultimately led to their production.” [25]

The core insight of ecological footprint analysis is that consumption choices — that is, lifestyles — are driving the ecological crisis. The conclusion is clear: a politics of less consumption. As the footprint book quoted above puts it, “We live in shrinking world. The inescapable conclusion is that we must learn to live a quality life with less.” [26] While the whole point of footprint analysis is to reveal *hidden* environmental impacts embedded in consumption, other scholars sought a more authentic basis for environmental politics in a direct lived relationship to the environment.

LIVELIHOOD ENVIRONMENTALISM AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Ecological footprint ideology made a politics of material gains impermissible among those who gained their living from commodities. Since consumer lifestyles were associated with a footprint, more consumption meant more ecological destruction. Taken to its extreme any class demand for, say, higher wages would necessarily mean a higher “footprint.” [27] Environmental politics became — by design — a politics of limits and less. Thus, the overwhelming focus of environmental politics shifted to examine the kinds of relations that could be built on the terrain of use value — cordoned off from capitalism and the commodity society. This explains the rise of “Small is Beautiful” -style environmentalism in the 1970s which celebrated all that is local, small-scale, and based on direct face-to-face cooperative work relations with minimal (and “appropriate”) technology. [28] This form of politics promised what Erik Olin Wright called “escaping capitalism,” or projects where the goal is to “create our own micro-alternative in which to live and flourish.” [29] If consumer lifestyles were to blame, authentic environmental politics could only be built in separation from this mass commodity society.

Many radicals of the New Left saw the limits of “Small is Beautiful” communes and the “Whole Earth Catalog” form of lifestyle politics. For a set of academics concerned with radical politics, combining interest in material demands (i.e., class) with ecology meant focusing on struggles on the margins of the global commodity society. Radical academics sought ecological politics on the terrain of use value: those directly appropriating their livelihood from nature or those whose own use value of labor power — bodily health — was directly imperiled by pollution. Thus, the two most popular radical approaches to ecological politics in academia centered on two approaches: political ecology and environmental justice. [30]

The subdiscipline of political ecology emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a Marxist offshoot of agrarian studies. It aimed to situate the struggles of poor rural populations (peasants, indigenous peoples, etc.) over land, resources, and environmental degradation within a Marxist political-economic framework. Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield’s *Land Degradation and Society* sought to analyze the, “constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups in society itself.” [31] The starting point of their analysis was the category of the

“land manager” — usually a peasant household with some degree of control over “use values” such as land and subsistence.

Emblematic of the approach was the volume *Liberation Ecologies* (edited by Richard Peet and Michael Watts) — its 1996 edition was quickly followed by a second 2004 edition with revised and new cases. [32] The cases all centered around place-based struggles for land and resources: soil degradation in Bolivia, deforestation in Madagascar, the Chipko “tree hugging” movement in India. One highly insightful aspect of this approach is its critical posture toward a kind of imperial environmentalism — attempting to impose ideas of pristine nature in ways that displace local communities. The goal was to often show that land degradation like deforestation or soil erosion should not be blamed on peasants themselves but by larger processes of *marginalization* wrought by global commodity flows and forms of state control.

The central focus of this work came to be centered on the concept of *livelihoods* [33] — communities who derived their sustenance directly from the land to some degree. Given the dynamics of global neoliberal capitalism, the key research finding of this approach focuses on *dispossession* of local communities from their traditional livelihood strategies. Marx called this process “primitive accumulation” but when David Harvey coined the term “accumulation by dispossession,” a new wave of scholarship emerged to focus intently on the manifold processes of dispossession occurring for land-based cultures and communities the world over. [34] So ecological research in this vein meant research among local communities and cultures resisting the slow engulfment of peasant and other traditional societies into a global capitalist commodity system. Yet, because capitalism is itself defined by the fact that the mass majority is already dispossessed of the means of production, such scholarship remained about the margins and periphery of the global economy.

The other hugely popular radical academic literature is environmental justice. Environmental justice also suggests a direct lived experience of the environment is a key basis for environmental struggle — in this case, the embodied exposure to toxic hazards and pollution. The use values under threat here include water, air, and, of course, that critical use value of bodily labor power. In an industrial society, the infrastructure and waste of industrialism are sited in marginalized communities, often of color. As such, environmental justice examines injustices at the intersection of race and class and the struggles to overcome them. [35]

With its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, environmental justice emerged to tackle the uneven distribution of toxic pollution dumped in communities of color throughout the United States. In 1983, the black residents of Warren County, North Carolina used tactics of civil disobedience to fight the siting of a PCB toxic waste dump. [36] In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice released a report called *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* detailing the statistical overlaps between marginalized racial groups and toxic waste and other environmental hazards. [37] In 1991, indigenous peoples, African American leaders, and others staged the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit declaring, “to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth.” [38] In February 1994, President Clinton passed an executive order, “to address environmental justice in minority populations and low-income populations.”

This historical narrative is often meant to explain the rise to prominence of the environmental justice movement (although below I will question how *successful* this movement has been). The underlying political focus is that it is these marginalized communities themselves that should lead environmental movements against the corporations poisoning them and their communities. It is their direct material experience with pollution and toxicity which grants them this special political status. Similarly, as environmental justice struggles have informed the climate movement, the climate

justice movement also sees marginalized “front line” communities as the key actors in the climate struggle. Like political ecology, this is often the peasants, indigenous peoples, and other communities most imperiled by climate change (e.g., coastal fishermen, drought-prone farmers, etc.). Yet how does environmental justice politics build solidarity with the majority of people who are fully engulfed within the commodity society, but not exposed to any *apparent* threat of toxic pollution?

THE LIMITS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

The rise of the environmental movement comes at a time of historic defeat for the Left. It is time to question if its politics are symptomatic of this defeat. The first key shortcoming is rooted in its understanding of *class responsibility* for the ecological crisis. The form of politics informed by ecological footprint analysis takes a political approach that blames all consumers for the ecological crisis. It is hard to see how a political strategy can win if its solution is to demand a further restriction on consumption by a class which has been struggling with wage stagnation for almost a half-century. How does it plan to attract working people to its cause if its main message to them is to accept further austerity?

Ecological footprint presents an analysis where all impacts can be traced back to the organisms (humans) who derive useful properties from those resources (consumers). But it is a view that construes the power equation in reverse order. By making consumers wholly responsible for their consumptive “impact,” this perspective ignores the critical role of capital, which constrains both the kind, and the quantity, of goods that are thrown into the market. The gasoline in your tank flowed through the hands of innumerable people seeking profit — oil-exploration technology consultants, production companies, rig-service firms, pipeline companies, gas station operators — yet you are the one responsible for the “footprint” simply because you pressed the gas leading to the emissions? When it comes to consumption, every commodity has users and profiteers along the chain: we should place the bulk of responsibility on those profiting from production — not simply people fulfilling their needs. This is not a moral calculus as much as an objective assessment of *who has the power* along these commodity chains. Of course, we don’t want to completely ignore the responsibility of those few wealthy consumers who buy fuel-inefficient cars, eat steak twice a week, and fly excessively. But why do we only focus on their consumption as the proper zone of responsibility and politics? A better question would be to ask how these consumers became so wealthy in the first place. Why are those work activities — those *choices* — not similarly subject to political critique and concern?

Take the problem of climate change. Richard Heede’s work traces 63 percent of all historical carbon emissions since the industrial revolution to ninety private and state corporations — what he calls “the carbon majors,” the class of capitalists who dig up fossil fuel and sell it for profit. [39] But the capitalists responsible for climate change are much broader than this. There are vast amounts of industrial capital dependent upon fossil fuel consumption — the most climate-relevant include cement (responsible for 7 percent of global carbon emissions), steel, chemicals, and other carbon-intensive forms of production. [40] According to the Energy Information Agency, the industrial sector consumes more of the world’s energy than the residential, commercial, and transportation sectors *combined*. [41] If we include emissions from electricity consumption, the industrial sector exceeds all others (including agriculture and land-use change) with 31 percent of global emissions. [42] Many social critics would label an attention to factories and industrial “points of production” as hopelessly orthodox, but for climate change and other ecological problems they remain the belly of the beast.

The second main shortcoming is the academic retreat from lifestyle politics to the privileging of livelihood environmentalism. This has less to do with who is blamed, and more with where in society

one locates authentic environmental struggles. Here the problem is a political focus on marginality which will not produce a more broadly based movement. Political ecology is fixated on struggles over dispossession in rural areas, including indigenous and peasant resistance. Any decent person would also support these movements for justice and self-determination, and we cannot downplay the importance of these struggles. I merely question how such struggles might build a kind of *social power* capable of taking on capital, which is responsible for the dispossession and pollution in the first place. The defining feature of capitalism is the vast majority are torn from the natural conditions of life — those not yet dispossessed are by definition marginal to the system as a whole. By placing direct livelihood experience of environmental resources as the only basis for politics, you severely limit the kind of political base you can build.

One can also legitimately raise strategic questions about movement success with environmental justice. It is instructive to examine some key insider scholar-activists' own reflections on the movement. In the year after Clinton's historic executive order, Benjamin Goldman — a data analyst for the famous 1987 *Toxic Waste and Race* report — argued that the actual power of the environmental justice movement was akin to "a gnat on the elephant's behind." [43] He updated the data from the 1987 report to show that "Despite the increased attention to the issue, people of color in the United States are now even more likely than whites to live in communities with commercial hazardous waste facilities than they were a decade ago." [44] Twenty-five years later, Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton come to a similar conclusion and cautiously call out the "failure" of environmental justice. They flatly state: "... poor communities and communities of color are still overexposed to environmental harms." [45]

For Goldman, the celebration of environmental justice politics misses the larger context of political defeat:

... [A]s progressives have applauded the emergence of the environmental justice movement, we have witnessed a period of the most awesome intensification in inequality, and, ultimately, a historically significant triumph for the rulers of transnational capital who have further consolidated their power, fortunes, and global freedoms. [46]

Goldman concludes that for the environmental justice movement to counter this corporate power it would need to, "... broaden its populist constituency to include more diverse interests." [47] Yet the appeal of the environmental justice movement for many progressives is, of course, it represents a struggle among the poorest and marginalized groups in capitalist society — low-income communities of color. Again, these struggles are hugely important and must not be ignored. But for environmental justice struggles to win, they must find a way to build a broader environmental movement with a base able to actually take on the corporations responsible for poisoning local communities. Thus far, we tend to validate the moral high ground of such struggles, without *strategically* asking how they might build power to overcome their situation.

Pulido et al. raise the question of the state. While the state often pays "lip service" to environmental justice concerns, it often fails to enforce regulations that would directly improve peoples' lives. [48] They argue for a more confrontational strategy:

Instead of seeing the state as a helpmate or partner, it needs to see the state as an adversary and directly challenge it.... *It's not about being respectable, acknowledged, and included. It's about raising hell for both polluters and the agencies that protect them.* [49]

In the context of neoliberal state capture (and Trump), this is obviously the correct strategy. But, in

the long run, the environmental justice movement could also think about a broader strategy that could build popular left power within the state itself (more on this in part 3). Such a politics would need to go beyond *marginality* and speak to what Goldman called “diverse interests.”

In sum, both lifestyle and its offshoot, livelihood environmentalism have emerged in the very period in which the environmental crisis has only worsened and private capital’s capacity to harm the environment has vastly expanded. Their political strategies are ineffective. We now turn to diagnose this ineffectiveness in more explicit historical and class terms.

Part 2. “Overshoot”: The Class Basis of Environmentalism

The environmental movement emerged during a period of crisis and restructuring in the 1960s and 1970s. While the politics of anticapitalism historically railed against the system’s inequality and poverty, by the 1970s commentators on both the Left and Right agreed capitalism faced a new problem: *affluence*. We simply had too much. Rising consumption levels — themselves the product of working-class victories — were now a problem. In the mid-seventies, a young Alan Greenspan argued economic crisis was rooted in overly “ambitious” societal expectations: “... governments strongly committed themselves to ameliorate social inequalities at home and abroad and to achieve an ever rising standard of living. However morally and socially commendable, these commitments proved to be too ambitious in economic terms — both in what they actually attempted to achieve as well as in the expectations they raised among the public.” [50] He went on to suggest this public must adjust to new “realistic goals” and that, “levels of income will be lower and the possible growth in standards of living will be reduced.” Society had “overshot” reasonable expectations. The solution? Austerity, or a politics of less.

From a much different political perspective, much of the “New Left” also turned its critique toward the problems of an affluent commodity society. Herbert Marcuse defined “pure domination ... as administration, and in the overdeveloped areas of mass consumption, the administered life becomes the good life for the whole ...” [51] Guy Debord asserted, “The diffuse spectacle accompanies the abundance of commodities” and that the commodity has “succeeded in totally colonizing social life.” [52] Critical theorist William Leiss argued consumer lifestyles did not satisfy fundamental human needs: “This setting promotes a lifestyle that is dependent upon an endlessly rising level of consumption of material goods ... [in which] individuals are led to misinterpret the nature of their needs.” [53] Christopher Lasch lampooned the American “cult of consumption” and the “propaganda of commodities” in ways that directly influenced President Jimmy Carter’s so-called “malaise speech” in which he claimed Americans, “tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption.” [54] Most agree the speech admonishing Americans to scale down paved the way for Reagan.

These critiques of affluence came at an odd time during a decade in which American workers were under attack. As historian Daniel Horowitz explains, “most Americans experienced [the 1970s] as one of economic pain ... the vast majority of the nation’s families experienced diminishing real incomes.” [55] Polls reported the rising cost of living was the number one concern for Americans (in a decade with no shortage of concerns). [56] In a context where the working class struggled to afford the basics of life many on the Left and Right told them they already had too much. As the Greenspans of the world won out, it became common sense that it was time to “do more with less”; it was time to cut — government spending, union benefits, and, household budgets alike.

The critique of affluence and “overconsumption” overlapped perfectly with the rise of the ecology movement at precisely the same moment. Much like Greenspan, the Club of Rome’s 1972 *Limits to Growth* announced a new reality to which society had to adjust: “man is forced to take account of the limited dimensions of his planet.” [57] Paul Ehrlich initially trumpeted the crudest Malthusianism in *The Population Bomb*, but a few years later, in 1974, he and his wife published *The End of Affluence*,

arguing that the mass consumer society had overshot its material base. [58] One of the most influential texts was William Catton's *Overshoot*, which explained how human resource use had "overshot" the carrying capacity of the Earth and mass die-off was imminent. [59] Environmental politics rose and expanded precisely during the period of neoliberal restraint. It subscribed to what Leigh Phillips terms an "austerity ecology" — a politics of limits, reducing consumption, and lessening our impact — reduce, reuse, recycle. [60]

It is in this context where the strange division between a "class" and "environmental" politics is rooted. A "new social movement," environmentalism rejected a politics rooted in material interests as hopelessly linked to the hollow materialism of the commodity society. Whereas a class politics was always about offering a vision of increased overall welfare, ecological politics became a politics of less. André Gorz developed an explicitly eco-socialist standpoint centered on less: "The only way to live better is to produce less, to consume less, to work less, to live differently." [61] Over the years class and environmental politics were constantly at odds in the "jobs versus environment" debate. It was working-class loggers who opposed the protection of the spotted owl or the restoration of salmon runs in the Columbia River. As Richard White recounts, the bumper sticker "Are you an Environmentalist or do you Work for a Living?" became popular among rural working-class communities. [62] While many working-class people were indeed hostile to elite environmentalism, this went both ways. Green politicians also blamed privileged workers for their consumption. Rudolph Baro, of the Green Party in Germany, plainly said: "The working class here [in the West] is the richest lower class in the world I must say that the metropolitan working class is the worst exploiting class in history." [63]

Many parts of the eco-left today still call for a politics of less. In 2018, the *New Left Review* published a piece by Troy Vettese that argued *for* austerity — or what he called "egalitarian eco-austerity" that aims to divide the less stuff equally. The article advocates, among other things, turning over half the planet to wild nature — an idea he takes from the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson — universal veganism, and an abstract plan for global per-capita energy rationing. [64] Perhaps the most popular strand on the eco-left today is the program of "degrowth" defined in a recent compilation as "an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that will reduce societies' throughput of energy and raw materials." [65] Degrowth proponents are quick to insist they don't want this to appear like a politics of "less" because they are calling for the redistribution of less stuff more equally and calling for *more* immaterial resources like time, community, and relationships. Yet, this program's obsession with overall material throughput and gdp growth — itself a statistical construction that obscures precisely who *benefits* from growth in a capitalist economy — fails to take into account that the vast majority of people in capitalist societies also need *more material stuff*. The experience of the neoliberal period has been defined for most by stagnant incomes/wages, increasing debt, eroding jobs security, and longer working hours. By centering its entire political program on the prefix of "de" and talk of "reductions," degrowth has little capacity to speak to the needs of the vast majority of workers ravaged by neoliberal austerity. [66] A class analysis would always be premised on not the aggregate of society (and whether or not it needs to grow or degrow), but rather conflictual class divisions where a few have way too much and the majority have too little.

What explains the nexus of ecology and a politics of less? One thing that unites these austerity perspectives — from Alan Greenspan to degrowth — is that they emerge from a specific *class formation mentioned above*, "the professional-managerial class," and what I will call, for simplicity, the professional class. [67] This class formation expanded rapidly in the postwar era through the dramatic expansion of higher education. It is radical academics, natural scientists, nonprofit managers, government workers, journalists, and other professionals who conclude modern lifestyles are to blame for our ecological crisis. Ironically, it is the professional class's own relative material security that induces this rather guilt-ridden conviction that "all of us" consumers are at the root of

the problem.

THE PROFESSIONAL CLASS: KNOWING ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

In 1976, Barbara and John Ehrenreich's controversial concept of the "professional-managerial class" was an attempt to take account of the dramatic rise in so-called white-collar occupations in an increasingly postindustrial knowledge economy. [68] On the one hand, they were attempting take account of the central role of "middle-class radicalism" in shaping the "New Left" politics prominent at the time. [69] In broader terms, they argued "the enormous expansion of higher education" had created, "a new stratum of educated wage earners ... impossible for Marxists to ignore." [70] They entered a debate among many Marxists on how to theorize the class location of such knowledge workers. Given their lack of ownership of the means of production — and reliance upon wages or salaries for survival — André Gorz and Serge Mallet called them the "new working class." [71] Nicos Poulantzas called them the "new petty bourgeoisie" and argued the traditional class cleavages between mental and manual workers applied. [72] Erik Olin Wright argued we should acknowledge the "contradictory class locations" of many professional occupations. [73] Regardless of how we theorize them, a key point is that the professional class is a minority of the population. Kim Moody estimates professionals make up 22 percent of the employed population in the United States (another 14 percent are categorized in "managerial" occupations). [74] He claims the working class represents 63 percent.

I do not aim to resolve these theoretical debates here. For my purposes, I want to emphasize the centrality of *knowledge*, and more broadly, *educational credentials* to professional-class life. Poulantzas explained this in terms of education and the making of a "career": "the role of these educational levels is far more important for circulation within the new petty bourgeoisie (the 'promotion' of its agents, and their 'careers', etc.), than it is for the working class." [75] The centrality of educational credentials means the professional class not only subscribes to the myth of "meritocracy," but also elevate the *individualized* capacity to impact the world — whether that is in terms of achieving a "career" or virtuously lowering your carbon footprint. Educational levels and credentials are not only central to professional-class life experiences but serve as a ticket toward a more *material* aspiration for a "middle class" life of cars, home ownership, kids, and financial security. Yet, while the professional class aspires to these banal aspects of middle-class security, they are often simultaneously reviled by it. Through exposure to elite education, many in the professional class come to think deeply about both the alienation and destruction inherent in the mass commodity society. This inward-looking guilt is often at the root of professional-class politics.

The politics of ecology emerged from this professional class. By the 1960s, the ecology movement not only proposed a particular kind of politics against environmental destruction, but also a mode of critique which situates knowledge and science at the core of struggle. Today this is fundamentally how climate politics is presented — a battle between those who "believe" and those who "deny" the science. This has historical roots as the ecology movement always situated scientific knowledge — credentials — at the center of ecological politics. In 1972, the *Ecologist* ran a cover story called "A Blueprint for Survival," which claimed a specific politics of authority rooted in credentials: "This document has been drawn up by a small team of people, all of whom, in different capacities, are professionally involved in the study of global environmental problems." [76] The more famous 1972 *Limits to Growth* also enacted the same vision of politics — that a team of researchers can study and thus know the true extent of ecological crisis. The foreword claims, "It is the predicament of mankind that man can perceive the problematique, yet, despite his considerable knowledge and skills, he does not understand the origins, significance, and interrelationships of its many components and thus is unable to devise effective responses." [77]

The central tenet of such ecological knowledge systems is an analysis rooted in *relationality* — or the

assertion, as Barry Commoner put it, “everything is connected to everything else.” [78] Although early ecological studies only aimed to study the relations among nonhuman organisms, the ecological movement was based in the assertion that humans must be studied in their deep interrelationships with the natural world. A classic ecological text of the 1970s, William Ophuls’s *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, lays out the core of an ecological critique of “our way of life”:

... due to man’s ignorance of nature’s workings, he has done so in a particularly destructive fashion ... we must learn to work with nature and to accept the basic ecological trade-offs between protection and production ... this will necessarily require major changes in our life ... for the essential message of ecology *limitation*: there is only so much the biosphere can take and only so much it can give, and this may be less than we desire ... [79]

If we *knew* the deep interrelations of our impacts on the biosphere, then we would truly understand the need for *limitation*. By focusing on “our life” it is clear where he thinks the limits should be placed: consumer lifestyles.

Now, a politics based upon “relationality” could have easily connected the dots in a way that pointed toward the culprits in the capitalist class who control production for profit. This form of analysis would yield a politics based on conflict and an inherent antagonism between capitalists and the mass of society over ecological survival. However, the knowledge associated with ecologies of “interdependence” did not point in this direction. This form of ecological relational knowledge leads directly to the ecological footprint analysis reviewed above.

This turn toward lifestyles and mutual guilt easily converged with the efforts of the business sector to reshape the more radical strains of the environmental movement. In the wake of the huge regulatory challenges to industry posed by the Clean Air and Water Acts — and widespread public belief that business was causing the environmental crisis — corporations devised massive public relations efforts to green their image. [80] Historian Joe Conley explains:

The goals of these programs ranged from deflecting criticism of environmental impacts and forestalling new environmental laws to promoting voluntary alternatives to regulation and gaining market share among ecologically-conscious consumers. [81]

Moreover, some corporations actively promoted the idea that environmental stewardship should be the individual consumer’s — not industry’s — responsibility. For example, perhaps the quintessential example of consumer action is recycling. Historian Ted Steinberg recounts the story of how industry groups like beer and soft drink manufactures — along with aluminum and plastics companies — organized to defeat a national bottle bill which would force industry to pay the cost of recycling. [82] They preferred public municipal recycling programs that place the responsibility on individual households to sort and recycle their waste. More perniciously, they vigorously promoted the idea that individual consumers were themselves the cause of pollution. He quotes an official from the American Plastics Council saying, “If I buy a product, I’m the polluter. I should be responsible for the disposal of the package.” [83] This is the logic of “ecological footprints” transferred to plastic bottles.

Poulantzas argued the professional class — or the “new petty bourgeoisie” — can shift back and forth from bourgeois and proletarian class positions. “These petty-bourgeois groupings can often ‘swing’ according to the conjuncture, sometimes in a very short space of time, from a proletarian to a bourgeois class position and vice versa.” [84] This section argued much of the professional class has adapted political strategies that align with capital’s decades-long insistence on austerity. But Poulantzas insists that “this ‘oscillation’ should not be taken as a natural or essential feature of the

petty bourgeoisie, but refers to its situation in the class struggle.” [85] In a time of renewed working-class militancy and resurgent socialist politics, what would an environmental politics from a working-class perspective look like?

Part 3. Working-Class Ecological Politics

For the environmental movement to expand beyond the professional class and establish a working-class base for itself, it cannot rely on austerity, shaming, and individualistic solutions as its pillars. It also cannot place so much emphasis on *knowledge* of the science (belief or denial). It has to mobilize around environmentally beneficial policies that appeal to the material interests of the vast majority of the working class mired in stagnant wages, debt, and job insecurity. A working-class environmental program would focus on *anti-austerity* politics. One premise might be: humans are ecological beings who have basic needs to reproduce their lives (food, energy, housing, health care, love, leisure). The proletarian reliance upon money and commodities for these basic needs creates high levels of stress — and excludes huge swathes from meeting them. Instead of seeing those needs as a source of “footprints” that must be reduced, we should acknowledge the majority of people in capitalist society need *more* and secure access to these basics of survival. To make this political we need to explain how human needs can be met through ecological principles.

Conveniently, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Sunrise Movement, and new left think tanks like “New Consensus” have coalesced around demanding a “Green New Deal” that in many ways attempts to build this kind of working-class environmental politics. The nonbinding resolution proposed by Rep. Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey, *centers* inequality and working-class gains. The resolution emphasizes all the technical requirements for a massive decarbonization program, but also offers “all people of the United States ... a job with a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security.” Many centrist liberal thinkers have lambasted the Green New Deal because it folds in broader demands like “Medicare for All” and a federal job guarantee when the focus should myopically be on climate and decarbonization. This couldn’t be more mistaken. The key is to build a movement where masses of people connect the dots to see the solutions to all our crises of climate, health care, and housing require building mass social power to combat the industries profiting from these very crises.

There is admirable political vision behind the Green New Deal. But, as of yet, we lack the kind of political movement that could actually achieve it. The demands of the Green New Deal require massive concessions from capital. In order to win such concessions, we need to see the working class as a mass base of social power and seek to build that power in two primary ways. First, the most obvious source of working-class power is simply the fact that they are the majority of the population (Moody actually estimates 75 percent if we include those doing care work outside the formal workforce). The Left is already learning that a key way to build popular mass support from this base is to offer programs based on the *decommodification of basic needs*. [86] Many radical ecological thinkers place attention on resistance to the commodification of nature [87] — or preventing the integration of new “frontier” environments into the circuits of capital. A working-class ecological politics should focus on the inverse of this: instead of only resisting the entrance of nature into the market, we can fight to extricate things people need *from* the market. Rather than focusing on those who have a direct “use value” or livelihood relation to the environment, this politics takes the working-class dependence on commodities as a key source of insecurity and exploitation. The recent surge in socialist electoral politics in the UK, US, and other countries has shown that these kinds of appeals to peoples’ basic needs can be extremely popular in societies ravaged by inequality and precariousness.

A Green New Deal-style decommodification program is not only meant to appeal to workers’ interests; it could also have tremendous ecological effects. Free public housing programs could also

integrate green building practices that provide cheaper heating and electricity bills for residents. [88] Free public transportation could fundamentally shift the overreliance on automobiles and other privatized modes of transport. There is no ethical reason why we should all agree that “health care is a human right,” but food and energy are not. With these we confront industries who are the central culprits in our ecological crisis. Moreover, this program of decommodification does not exclude traditional ecological movements for preservation or conservation of wilderness or “open space.” It is a politics of building and enlarging the zone of social life where capital is not allowed. The combination of the Green New Deal’s “federal job guarantee” with the decommodification of social needs could also include the traditional left-labor demand for a *shorter workweek* since the total number of work hours could be spread among fewer workers and the basics of life will simply cost less. [89]

A Green New Deal based on decommodification is also about shifting power and control over society’s resources. The most ecologically beneficial part of this program is that it aims to transfer these industries from private to public ownership so that environmental goals can predominate over profits. For climate change, there is one sector in particular that could become a critical site of struggle: electricity. [90] A rapid plan of decarbonization will require a program based on the “electrification of everything,” including transportation and residential and commercial heating. [91] In the United States context, this not only means “greening” an electric power sector that is still 62.9 percent powered by fossil fuels (mainly natural gas and coal), but also massively expanding electric generation to accommodate increased demand from electrification of other sectors. [92] This program will require a massive struggle against the investor-owned private utility industry. According to one report, this industry only includes 199 private utilities (representing 9 percent of the total number of utilities), but they service 75 percent of the electric consumer base. [93] A rapid decarbonization plan would clearly require placing these 199 companies under public ownership — and they would not relinquish their guaranteed profits without a fight.

Because of its “natural monopoly” status (it only makes sense for one company to handle provision on a single grid network), the electricity sector is already subject to intense forms of public regulation and scrutiny. That is, it is a sector more open to political contestation than others. Moreover, since electricity is absolutely central to social reproduction — and because there is already an existing reservoir of working-class anger at private utilities companies for exorbitant rates and shutoffs [94] — it would be straightforward to build mass working-class campaigns based on both the need to rapidly decarbonize electricity *and* offer cheaper, even free, electricity for households. While climate change politics is often abstract — debating global temperature targets and parts per million in the atmosphere — masses of workers could easily understand free electricity.

Any decommodification and public sector program will also raise the question of how to “pay” for it. Like the old New Deal, the answer must focus on corporations and the wealthy. This will require an antagonistic politics that explains who really is responsible for ecological crisis that is not inward and guilt-ridden, and that does not blame working-class consumption. It will channel already existing class anger at the rich for causing the ecological crisis. Contrary to neoliberal orthodoxy, taxing the rich is also very popular among the working class. Political scientist Spencer Piston’s recent research found remarkable levels of public support for policies based on what he calls “resentment of the rich.” [95] In response to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s call for higher taxes on the rich to fund a Green New Deal, a recent poll found that 76 percent of Americans and even a majority of Republicans are in favor of higher taxes on the rich. [96]

The second major source of working-class power is not merely their numbers, but their *strategic location in the workplace* as the source of labor underpinning private profits and public social reproduction. The working class has the capacity to withdraw their labor and *force* concessions from

capital through strikes and other forms of disruptive politics. Mass disruptive action can create a larger sense of crisis, where capital will conclude that “their least painful choice is to accept the demands of workers for a livable climate and an end to poverty through a Green New Deal.” [97] Ecological politics has long understood the power of disruption, but usually deploys this *outside* the workplace in ways that appear antagonistic to workers. Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* fictionally depicts activists putting their bodies in the way of mines and other infrastructure and using tools to dismantle the machines of ecological destruction. [98] In real life, Earth First! developed the tactic of “tree sitting” to block the logging of old growth forests. Today what Naomi Klein calls “Blockadia” describes the many activists blocking pipeline expansion and other fossil fuel infrastructure like coal-fired power plants. [99] A modern day “monkey wrench gang” includes the “valve turners” who use bolt cutters and other tools to access pipeline valves to stop the flow of oil or gas. These activists rightly recognize the power of mass disruption in winning political demands. Yet the current army of eco-direct action activists only possess limited disruptive capacity. They succeed in blocking a pipeline here, an oil train there, but fail to put much of a dent in the mass fossil fuel complex at the center of the reproduction of capitalism. The most inspiring, and in many ways successful, upsurge was the #nodapl movement at Standing Rock — yet, in the wake of Trump’s election, the Dakota Access pipeline now carries, and indeed sometimes spills, fracked crude from the Bakken.

Could ecological politics appeal to workers with the capacity to shut down capitalism from the inside? Can we build what Sean Sweeney calls an “ecological unionism” where workers see their struggle against management as an environmental struggle? [100] This could start by simply making the connection between the ways bosses exploit workers and the environment. This connection used to be much more central to the environmental movement in the 1960s. Tony Mazzocchi’s Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union helped force the creation of the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, which was set up with the same purpose in mind as the Environmental Protection Agency — protecting *life* from industrial capitalists. Connor Kilpatrick explains, “As Mazzocchi saw it, those chemicals that poisoned his union’s rank and file eventually make their way into communities outside — through the air, soil, and waterways.” [101] Although weakened, unions still fight on these terms; in 2015, the United Steelworkers oil refinery strikes focused in large part on workplace health and safety. [102]

Much is made of the current anti-environmentalism within building-trade unions and those sectors wrapped up in the fossil fuel industrial complex. [103] Several unions supported both the Keystone and Dakota Access Pipeline on the basis of providing good paying jobs. In environmental struggles, it is often labor and capital aligned against activists. Yet building-trade workers and coal miners are a very small proportion of the overall workforce. It is more plausible to look outside the dirtiest and most destructive sectors to find a form of labor militancy that can be conjoined with a larger ecological politics. There is also reason to not only focus direct action against rural resource extraction (where the labor movement is very weak). There is a tendency — reproduced by political ecology scholarship reviewed above — to believe that the “real” environmental struggle is in the rural sites where we extract the stuff or where “real” natural landscapes are in peril.

A working-class ecological politics could also be effectively built within those industries with very little environmental impact in the first place. Jane McAlevey has persuasively argued that the health care and education sectors should be the strategic target of a new working-class union movement. [104] These sectors are the very basis of social reproduction in many communities — and unlike steel plants they cannot be offshored. Alyssa Battistoni also argues these “social reproduction” or “care” sectors are inherently low-carbon and low-impact sectors. [105] Expanding these sectors should be central to the political ecology focused on “care” in the larger sense of the term (to include ecosystems and other life support systems). Many of these struggles are also in the

very public sector that will be crucial to the program of decommodification reviewed above.

In the last year, McAlevey's advice has become reality with the largest wave of strikes since 1986 — almost all confined to the education sector. [106] In line with the program advocated here, these strikes are fundamentally about fighting *austerity* and improving the lives of the workers involved. The West Virginia teachers' strike, for example, shut down the central institution of social reproduction (schools) to achieve a set of material demands — including taxing the fossil fuel industry to provide revenue for better schools. [107] But these strikes are also fundamentally about improving life beyond the workplace. The teachers' strikes have been described as “bargaining for the common good” in which the demands articulate a larger vision of public betterment through working-class power. [108] The recent United Teachers of Los Angeles strike not only demanded better funded schools, but also increased green spaces on the school grounds. [109] This largely anti-austerity politics built around the common good could easily be folded into a larger green program based on the unionized jobs to create public green infrastructure, housing, and transit as laid out above. Public transit unions and workers in the utility sector could also be organized along these lines.

Building ecological power through the working class — as the majority of society and whose labor makes the entire system work — could form a formidable challenge to the rule of capital over life and planetary survival. Winning this struggle will begin by emphasizing the need for “less” and “sacrifice” should only be borne by the rich and corporations; the rest of us have so much to gain.

CONCLUSION

In the crisis and transformations of the late 1960s and 1970s, two major shifts occurred. First, using crisis as its pretext, neoliberal forces consolidated to argue that societal expectations of the postwar “affluent” economy had overshot reality and austerity was required to check government spending and union power. Second, much of the “New Left” was inundated by the newly minted graduates of the professional classes (themselves a product of the unprecedented expansion of higher education in the postwar era). This left also became highly critical of “affluence” and a commodity society based in consumerism. These two factors converged in an ecology movement almost wholly populated by this professional class who used scientific models to also argue that societal “affluence” and consumption required a politics of limits and austerity. The quintessential method of this perspective is that of the ecological footprint tool which ultimately argues it is consumers who drive economic decision-making and ecological degradation. In this period, it became taken for granted that an ecological politics meant something different than a class politics; to put it plainly, ecology demanded a politics of less, class meant an outdated politics of more. Although some professional-class academics saw a more radical ecology in material interests, it assumed such a politics could only be formed on the basis of those marginalized communities with a direct livelihood relationship with nature or pollution.

During this same period, capital has only consolidated its power and the ecological crisis has only worsened. Yet with the Bernie Sanders campaign, other electoral victories, and an insurgency of strikes and working-class militancy, the Left is resurgent for the first time in decades. It has finally moved from a language of “resistance” to a language of how to build power. Building an effective environmental politics is not something that needs to be speculatively designed by nonprofits or activist think tanks. We can simply learn from the existing movement around us. Whether we are organizing around unions, rent control, health care, or environmental betterment, in every case capital is fighting to stop it. As Marx said, “Capital ... takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so.” [110] Capital also takes no account of *all life* and is taking the planet to the brink. We just need to develop a social force capable of stopping it.

Matt T. Huber is an associate professor of geography at Syracuse University. He is the author of *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom and the Forces of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013). He is currently working on a book on class and climate politics for Verso Books.

Matt T. Huber

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Catalyst

<https://catalyst-journal.com/vol3/no1/ecological-politics-for-the-working-class>

Footnotes

[1] Paul Griffin, *The Carbon Majors Database: CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017* (London: Carbon Disclosure Project, 2017), 5.

[2] Elizabeth Gamillo, "Atmospheric carbon last year reached levels not seen in 800,000 years" *Science*.

[3] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5 °C*.

[4] Maisa Rojas, Fabrice Lambert, Julian Ramirez-Villegas, and Andrew J. Challinor, "Emergence of robust precipitation changes across crop production areas in the 21st century," *Proceedings of The National Academy Of Sciences* (early view, 2019).

[5] *Climate Guide Blog*: "Non-survivable humid heatwaves for over 500 million people," March 9, 2019.

[6] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C approved by governments," October 8, 2018.

[7] Democracy Now, "Climate Scientist: As U.N. Warns of Global Catastrophe, We Need a "Marshall Plan" for Climate Change," October 9, 2018.

[8] Griffin, 2017.

[9] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

[10] Adaner Usmani, "Democracy and Class Struggle," *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 3 (2018): 664-704.

- [11] Vivek Chibber, "Why the Working Class?" *Jacobin*, March 3, 2016.
- [12] Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class" in Pat Walker (ed.) *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 5–45.
- [13] Leigh Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse Porn Addicts* (London: Zero Books, 2015).
- [14] For recent, but somewhat different arguments along these lines see, Stefania Barca and Emanuele Leonardi, "Working-class ecology and union politics: a conceptual topology" *Globalizations* 15, no. 4 (2018): 487–503; Daniel Aldana Cohen, "Working-Class Environmentalism," *Public Books*, November 16, 2017.
- [15] See Nato Green, "Why Unions Must Bargain Over Climate Change," *In These Times* March 12, 2019.
- [16] Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- [17] I don't have space to develop this here, but the concept of *life* here is crucial. Under capitalism, life is opposed to work or production. By quarantining life as the zone of freedom, choice, and politics, work remains an unfree space where political intervention is not permitted. I develop this in *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- [18] Neither lifestyle nor livelihood environmentalism are my terms. This blog post also argues they are deeply connected (but from a much different perspective than mine): Mat McDermott, "Is there a difference between lifestyle & livelihood environmentalism?" *Treehugger*, June 6, 2011.
- [19] Joan Martinez Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2002).
- [20] Nicky Chambers, Craig Simmons, and Mathis Wackernagel, *Sharing Nature's Interest: Ecological Footprints as an Indicator of Sustainability* (London: Routledge, 1996), xix.
- [21] *Ibid*, 60.
- [22] Timothy Gore, "Extreme Carbon Inequality: Why the Paris climate deal must put the poorest, lowest emitting and most vulnerable people first," Oxfam International, December 2, 2015.
- [23] *Ibid*, 1.
- [24] *Ibid*, 3.
- [25] Kevin Ummel, "Who Pollutes? A Household-Level Database of America's greenhouse gas footprint," Working Paper 381, Center for Global Development.
- [26] Chambers et al., *Sharing Nature's Interest*, 66.
- [27] Phillips, *Austerity Ecology*, 37.

- [28] E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
- [29] Erik Olin Wright, "How to Be an Anticapitalist Today," *Jacobin*, December 2, 2015.
- [30] I present a very sympathetic critique of these approaches here. My entire intellectual development is rooted in them still.
- [31] Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 17.
- [32] Richard Peet and Michael Watts, *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (London Routledge, 1996 1st Ed; 2004 2nd Ed).
- [33] See, in particular, Anthony Bebbington, "Capitals and Capabilities: A Framework for Analyzing Peasant Viability, Rural Livelihoods and Poverty," *World Development* 27, no. 12 (1999): 2021-2044.
- [34] David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- [35] See Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, And Environmental Quality* (Boulder, Co: Westview, 1990).
- [36] Eileen McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, pcbs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).
- [37] United Church of Christ, Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987).
- [38] Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, "Principles of Environmental Justice." Available online: <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>.
- [39] Richard Heede, "Tracing anthropogenic carbon dioxide and methane emissions to fossil fuel and cement producers, 1854-2010," *Climatic Change* 122, no. 1-2 (2014): 229-241.
- [40] Chelsea Harvey, "Cement Producers Are Developing a Plan to Reduce CO₂ Emissions," *E&E News*, July 9, 2018.
- [41] Energy Information Agency, *International Energy Outlook 2017*. Table: Delivered energy consumption by end-use sector and fuel. Case: Reference | Region: Total World. Available online: <https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/aeo/data/browser/#/?id=15-IEO2017®ion=4-0&cases=Reference&start=2010&end=2050&f=A&linechart=Reference-d021916a.2-15-IEO2016.4-0&map=&sourcekey=0>.
- [42] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2014 Mitigation of Climate Change Working Group III Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 44.
- [43] Benjamin Goldman, "What is the future of environmental justice?" *Antipode* 28, no. 2 (1995): 122-141; 130. Given this was published after the Newt Gingrich Republican wave in 1994, I can

only assume the metaphor was a conscious choice.

[44] Ibid, 127.

[45] Laura Pulido, Ellen Kohl, and Nicole-Marie Cotton, "State Regulation and Environmental Justice: The Need for Strategy Reassessment," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 27, no. 2 (2016): 12-31; 12.

[46] Goldman, "What Is the Future of Environmental Justice?" 129.

[47] Ibid 126.

[48] Pulido et al., 27.

[49] Ibid, emphasis in original.

[50] Alan Greenspan, "The Impact of the 1973-1974 Oil Price Increase on the United States Economy to 1980," US Council of Economic Advisors, Alan Greenspan, Box 48, Folder 1, Gerald Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Mich.

[51] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 255.

[52] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1967), 32, 21.

[53] William Leiss, *Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), x.

[54] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 32, 73; Jimmy Carter, "The Crisis of Confidence Speech," 1979.

[55] Daniel Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

[56] Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 112.

[57] Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1974).

[58] Paul Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich, *The End of Affluence: A Blueprint for your Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974).

[59] William Catton, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

[60] Leigh Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse Porn Addicts* (London: Zero Books, 2015).

[61] André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975), 68-69.

[62] Richard White, "Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living? Work and nature"

in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-186.

[63] Rudolph Bahro, *From Red to Green: Interviews with the New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1984), 184.

[64] Troy Vettese, "To Freeze the Thames: Natural Geo-Engineering and Biodiversity," *New Left Review* 111 (May-June 2018): 63-86.

[65] Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2015), 3-4.

[66] For a critique of degrowth and Vettese's article in particular see, Robert Pollin, "De-Growth vs a Green New Deal," *New Left Review* 112 (July-August 2018): 5-25.

[67] I think there are significant political-ideological cleavages between "managerial" and "professional" occupations; particularly with regard to ecological politics where the former is likely quite oppositional and the latter quite supportive. See the Ehrenreichs' full essay and a book full of commentary and critique in Pat Walker (ed.) *Between Capital and Labor* (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

[68] Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979.

[69] Ibid, 6.

[70] Ibid, 7.

[71] See, André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) and Serge Mallet, *Essays on the New Working Class* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975).

[72] Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1974).

[73] Erik Olin Wright, *Understanding Class* (London: Verso, 2015).

[74] Kim Moody, *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 40.

[75] Poulantzas, *ibid*.

[76] Ibid, 1.

[77] Meadows et al. *Limits*, 11.

[78] Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1970).

[79] Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity* (W.H. Freeman, 1977).

[80] Joe Conley, *Environmentalism Contained: A History of Corporate Responses to the New Environmentalism* Doctoral Dissertation Manuscript, Princeton University, Program on the

History of Science, November 2006.

[81] Ibid, 62.

[82] Ted Steinberg, "Can Capitalism Save the Planet? On the Origins of Green Liberalism," *Radical History Review* 107 (Spring 2010): 7-24.

[83] Ibid, 15.

[84] Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Society*, 298.

[85] Ibid.

[86] For others who fold decommodification into eco-socialist politics see: Thea Riofrancos, Robert Shaw, and Will Speck, "Eco-Socialism or Bust," *Jacobin*, April 20, 2018; Greg Albo and Lilian Yap, "From the Tar Sands to 'Green Jobs'? Work and Ecological Justice," *Bullet*, July 12, 2016.

[87] For a useful review see Scott Prudham, "Commodification" in Noel Castree, David Demeritt, Diana Liverman, and Bruce Rhoads (eds.), *A Companion to Environmental Geography* (London: Wiley, 2009), 123-142.

[88] Daniel Aldana Cohen, "A Green New Deal for Housing," *Jacobin*, February 8, 2019.

[89] Kate Aronoff, "Could a Green New Deal Make Us Happier People?" *Intercept*, April 7, 2019.

[90] Johanna Bozuwa, "Public Ownership for Energy Democracy," *The Next System Project*, September 3, 2018.

[91] David Roberts, "The key to tackling climate change: electrify everything," *Vox*, October 27, 2017.

[92] US Energy Information Administration, <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=427&t=3>.

[93] Jim Lazar, *Electricity Regulation in the US: A Guide*. (Montpelier, VT: The Regulatory Assistance Project).

[94] The Providence DSA chapter has embarked on a campaign on this terrain called "#NationalizeGrid." See, Riofrancos, Shaw, and Speck, "Eco-Socialism or Bust."

[95] Spencer Piston, *Class Attitudes in America: Sympathy for the Poor, Resentment of the Rich, and Political Implications* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[96] Patricia Cohen and Maggie Astor, "For Democrats Aiming Taxes at the Superrich, 'the Moment Belongs to the Bold,'" *New York Times*, February 8, 2019.

[97] Keith Bower Brown, Jeremy Gong, Matt Huber, and Jamie Munro, "A Class Struggle Strategy for A Green New Deal," *Socialism Forum* (Winter 2019).

[98] Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (Salt Lake City, UT: Dream Garden Press, 1985).

- [99] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 293–336
- [100] Sean Sweeney, “Earth to Labor: Economic Growth is No Salvation,” *New Labor Forum* 21, no. 1 (2012): 10–13.
- [101] Connor Kilpatrick, “Victory Over the Sun,” *Jacobin*, August 31, 2017.
- [102] Trish Kahle, “The Seeds of an Alternative,” *Jacobin*, February 19, 2015.
- [103] Erik Loomis, “Why labor and environmental movements split—and how they can come back together” *Environmental Health News*, September 18, 2018.
- [104] Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- [105] Alyssa Battistoni, “Living, Not Just Surviving,” *Jacobin*, August 15, 2017.
- [106] Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Work Stoppages Summary,” February 8, 2019.
- [107] Kate Aronoff, “Striking Teachers in Coal and Gas Country are Forcing States to Rethink Energy Company Giveaways,” *Intercept*, April 12, 2018.
- [108] Steven Greenhouse, “The strike isn’t just for wages anymore. It’s for ‘the common good.’” *Washington Post*, January 24, 2019 and Nato Green, “Why Unions Must Bargain Over Climate Change,” *In These Times*, March 12, 2019.
- [109] United Teachers of Los Angeles, “Summary of Tentative Agreement/UTLA and LAUSD January 22, 2019,”
https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/Summary%20of%20Tentative%20Agreement%20FINAL3%20012219_0.pdf.
- [110] Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1990), 381.