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Nicholas Stern's report on climate change

Anarcho

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Anarchists have been writing on ecological issues since, at least, the 1960s. Murray Bookchin, who died earlier this year, led the anarchist concern about ecological destruction with such classic works as “Post-Scarcity Anarchism,” “Towards an Ecological Society” and “The Ecology of Freedom.” His warnings have come true to a threateningly worrying degree. Sadly, his solutions are still ignored but that is unsurprising as they go to the heart of the ecological problem, namely domination within humanity as the precondition for the domination of nature and the nature of the capitalist economy.

This can be seen from Nicholas Stern's report on climate change. The report's impact is, undoubtedly, due to it placing a money sum on the dangers of environmental disruption. Such is capitalism — people and planet can go to the dogs, but any threat to profits must be acted upon. Which is ironic, as it is the power of money which is causing the bulk of the problems we face.

Blair, true to his Thatcherite agenda, says any Climate Change Bill must be “fully compatible with the interests of

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businesses and consumers as well.” Yet under capitalism business is actively rewarded by pushing costs onto others. If a firm pollutes, then it saves money on costs and so gains a competitive advantage on the market compared to others. This process is called “externalities” in economics jargon and is a major source of market failure. People, as consumers, also benefit as they get lower prices. That they lose as individuals is irrelevant to the market.

Which shows one of the limitations in framing climate change in terms of the almighty market. People are more than just consumers. They have interests that are not, and cannot be, fully expressed by their consumption decisions. Indeed, these interests may be harmed by the collective results of their individual consumption decisions (never mind those needs which are collective in nature).

Then there is the gist of Stern’s message, namely that “we” have to make some sacrifices now to avert future catastrophe. The most obvious issue is the fact there is no “we” as “we” live in a class and hierarchy ridden society, with power and wealth unequally distributed. Is the impact of, say, a corporation really the same as, say, someone on the minimum wage trying to make ends meet?

The sacrifice we are being asked to make is to do without some economic growth. Yet this is an odd “sacrifice” as, surely, this means less work, less shopping, and, presumably, less pressure and less stress. It assumes, in other words, that buying things is the way to happiness rather than, say, an expression of alienation and unhappiness. As Juliet Schor noted in her excellent book “The Overworked American,” it is possible to have a standard of living comparable to, say, the 1960s and work half the time. This would mean being happier, healthier and having more time for yourself and each other.

Bookchin noted the difference between ecology and environmentalism. The later is simply better management of nature viewed as a “natural resource.” The former looks at the under-

lying social roots of the ecological problem and rejects the idea that nature should be considered as nothing more than a resource to be used by humanity. Environmentalism lies at the root of the Stern report, ignoring the wider issue of a “grow-or-die” economy like capitalism. Accumulation of capital is an imperative of the system. New products must be produced, new technology invested, new markets created, new ways to externalise costs onto the workforce and nature found – all in the interest of securing more profits. It is an irrational system, one which forces people to comply with its madness in order to survive.

Thus it becomes “natural” to overwork and have less quality time for ourselves. Rather than spend time enjoying cooking for ourselves, we grab a plastic encased ready-meal before slumping exhausted before the telly. We have more “choice” of gadgets, but less satisfaction (particularly as advertising is aimed by increasing that feeling). We put more people in colleges and universities to meet the demand for an “educated” labour, but have less education in the true sense. We privatise health services to “improve” efficiency (and make the corporate profits soar) while overall health levels are harmed by stress, depression and pollution related illnesses. We have a communications technology which is may be information-rich, but knowledge-poor. And all the while the rich get richer and we and planet pay the price.

Our ecological problems are systemic. Unless the core problem is addressed, things will get worse. At best, any green measures implemented will slow down the process of ecological disruption and should be encouraged (where they are sensible). But, ultimately, the solution to climate change is rooted in changing the system.