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Green Illusions

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Epilogue: A Grander Narrative?

And the people bowed and prayed / to the neon
god they made. —Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel,
“The Sound of Silence”

When approaching any large challenge, it is sometimes difficult to know where to start, and in our particular global crisis, nations are finding it difficult to determine *who* should start. In response to the statistic that China is building more than a gigawatt of new coal-fired power plants every week, Berkeley physicist Richard Muller asks, “Do we demand that the Chinese stop? Do we have the right to do that? Do we have the power to do that?” His answers are even more straightforward, “No, no, and no.”¹

Analysts often characterize China as following an unsustainable path compared to the United States, but consider this: One country has a fertility rate below replacement value and an annual per-capita energy consumption equivalent to 1,500 kilograms of oil per year. The other country’s population is expanding and its citizens annually consume over five times as much energy, equivalent to 7,700 kilograms per year.² When comparing a modestly consuming

populace whose numbers will someday be smaller with a more substantially consuming populace growing exponentially, it is not difficult to determine which is sustainable within the limits of a finite planet and which is not.³ Americans are not in a position to preach.

As an alternative to preaching, Thomas Friedman asserts, “I would much prefer to put our energy into creating an American model so compelling that other countries would want to follow it on their own. . . . A truly green America would be more valuable than fifty Kyoto Protocols. Emulation is always more effective than compulsion.”⁴

Are the first steps in this book sufficient to create such a compelling American model? No. They’re simply a start. Nevertheless, I never intended to write a grand narrative. Frankly, I’m not so sure it would be worth reading if I did. But what if I had attempted to do so? What could I have drawn upon?

I might have launched directly into the gut of environmental ethics, American religion, and knowledge frameworks by quoting Lynn White, who argued in the 1960s: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink the one we have.” I could have scripted an impassioned introduction drawing upon writers such as Bill McKibben, Vandana Shiva, Joseph Stiglitz, James Lovelock, and Raj Patel.⁵ And there are the many thinkers featured in the volume *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* to consider as well.⁶ I could then have tempered their optimism by quoting cantankerous theorists such as, Curtis White, author of *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don’t Think for Themselves* and *The Barbaric Heart: Faith, Money, and the Crisis of Nature*; James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Long Emergency*; Chris Hedges, author of *American Fascists*; and John Michael Greer, author of *The Ecotechnic Future*.⁷ Or I could have featured the more scientific sobrieties

of Elizabeth Kolbert, author of *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, or Fen Montaigne, author of *Fraser's Penguins*.⁸

Alternately, I could have opted for an equally provocative (and ideologically charged) beginning by framing imperialism as the root of our environmental problems and quoting documentary filmmaker Philippe Diaz who claims: "The first resource we took was the land, and when you take the land away from the people, you create the slave. . . . How did these small countries like Great Britain, France, Holland, and Belgium become these huge empires with almost no resources whatsoever? Well, by taking by force, of course, resources from the South."⁹ I might have drawn upon any number of historians, anthropologists, and social scientists who maintain that over the past five hundred years, we've become more efficient at performing these extractions, primarily through the economic instruments we call privatization, debt service, and free trade (as well as through good old-fashioned force and intimidation). From there, I could have quoted the activist Derrick Jensen, who observes,

Once a people have committed (or enslaved) themselves to a growth economy, they've pretty much committed themselves to a perpetual war economy, because in order to maintain this growth, they will have to continue to colonize an ever-wider swath of the planet and exploit its inhabitants. . . . The bad news for those committed to a growth economy is that it's essentially a dead-end street: once you've overshot your home's carrying capacity, you have only two choices: keep living beyond the means of the planet until your culture collapses; or proactively elect to give up the benefits you gained from the conquest in order to save your culture.¹⁰

To extend his affront to growthism, I could have drawn upon insight from Daniel Quinn, Donella H. Meadows, the antics of *The Yes Men*, and solutions from the multiauthored volume

Alternatives to Economic Globalization.¹¹ This approach would have formed a springboard to consider inequality.

I might even have chosen to characterize America as a young dynasty system. I could have started by featuring thinkers who point out that this dynasty system has actually increased prosperity for all Americans, not just the rich. Next I could have featured social scientists who argue that while Americans have traditionally idealized storylines portraying the social and economic mobility among classes, the American socioeconomic system today is actually quite rigid—where and to whom you are born is becoming an ever more accurate predictor of future prosperity. I may have argued that unequal structures of material wealth, power, and dynastic pressure pose distinct challenges to strengthening environmental fundamentals. These themes get fleshed out in *Winner-Take-All Politics* by Paul Pierson and Jacob S. Hacker, *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *Griftopia* by Matt Taibbi, and by a wide range of political scientists in the book *Inequality and American Democracy*.¹²

Next I could have pointed to those theorists who argue that extreme capitalism cannot coexist with a durable environmental movement. Among them is James Gustave Speth, author of *The Bridge at the End of the World*, who admits that his conclusion, “after much searching and considerable reluctance, is that most environmental deterioration is a result of systemic failures of the capitalism that we have today and that long-term solutions must seek transformative change in the key features of this contemporary capitalism.”¹³ Another moderate voice I could have chosen to highlight is John Perkins, a self-described “economic hit man” who was a gear in this machinery for a decade, a position he describes in several books on the topic. In a recent interview, he insisted, “I don’t think the failure is capitalism, I think it is a specific kind of capitalism that we’ve developed in the last thirty or forty years, particularly beginning with the time of Reagan and Milton Friedman’s economic theories,

which stress that the only goal of business is to maximize profits, regardless of the social and environmental costs and not to regulate businesses at all . . . and to privatize everything so that everything is run by private business.”¹⁴

Today it is difficult to imagine that through the first hundred years of America’s adolescence the government required corporations to apply for charters detailing how the company served the public good. Every ten years or so, the charters would come up for renewal and if the company’s directors could not prove that the company was serving the public interest, the government revoked their charter and disbanded the company. That changed in the late 1880s, when the U.S. Supreme Court started to treat corporations more like individuals. Numerous thinkers analyze the corporation’s rise from a wide array of vantage points. Among them are Joel Bakan, author of *The Corporation*; Naomi Klein, author of *The Shock Doctrine*; Carl Safina, author of *The View from Lazy Point*; as well as many volumes by David Harvey, Sam Smith, Slavoj Žižek, and of course the public intellectual, Noam Chomsky.¹⁵ These critiques would have opened up room to imagine new forms of democracy, community, and economy, such as those envisioned in Kirkpatrick Sale’s *Human Scale* and William A. Shutkin’s *The Land That Could Be*.¹⁶

Instead of negotiating that thicket of leftist thorns, I might have chosen to avoid it by paddling my grand narrative through the varied seductions of technology itself. I could have started by discussing Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, cautioning how technological adoration might overcome our capacity to think.¹⁷ Or I might have chosen E. M. Forster’s novella *The Machine Stops*, written over a hundred years ago with spine-tingling premonition.¹⁸ I could have moved on to discuss the symbolism of environmental initiatives by drawing on Yanow Dvora’s *How Does a Policy Mean?*, Charles Lindblom’s *Inquiry and Change*, and Neil Postman’s books *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* and *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.¹⁹ I might have chosen to

investigate the interstitial forces between society and technology more broadly, as portrayed by thinkers such as David Nye, Andrew Feenburg, Sherry Turkle, Michel Foucault, and Thomas Kuhn.²⁰ Many others are featured in the edited volume *Technology and Society: Building Our Sociotechnical Future*.²¹ I could even have focused on the specific blend of social, personal, and technological challenges to achieving a truly sustainable energy system. But that excellent book, *Sustainable Energy Consumption and Society*, has already been written by David Goldblatt.²²

In anticipation of those who might say that any grand narrative challenging established conceptions of capitalism, growth, inequality, consumption, and governance is but a dreamy impracticality, I might have gone so far as to quote the stalwart Milton Friedman, who observed: “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”²³ On more likely, I might simply have quoted Gar Alperovitz, who reminds us in his book *America Beyond Capitalism* that “fundamental change—indeed, radical systemic change—is as common as grass in world history.”

And finally, in the epilogue, I might even have attempted to trick you into reading a “further readings” list by couching it in terms of a grand narrative.

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