

## 16. The Ecology of Consumption

But think, I beseech you, of the product of England, the workshop of the world, and will you not be bewildered, as I am, at the thought of the mass of things which no sane man could desire, but which our useless toil makes—and sells?

—WILLIAM MORRIS<sup>1</sup>

Environmentalists, especially in wealthy countries, have often approached the question of environmental sustainability by stressing population and technology, while deemphasizing the middle term in the well-known IPAT (environmental Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) formula. The reasons for this are not difficult to see. Within capitalist society, there has always been a tendency to blame anything but the economic system itself for ecological overshoot. Yet if the developing ecological crisis has taught us anything, it is that even though population growth and inappropriate technologies have played important roles in accelerating environmental degradation, the ecological rift we are now facing has its principal source in the economy.

Although the population of the world has grown dramatically over the past century, the global economy has expanded much faster, and the most affluent nations devour natural resources at a much higher

rate than do poorer nations with equal or larger population sizes. In China and India in recent years the effects of population growth (which has slowed in these nations) have been dwarfed by rapidly rising per capita economic output coupled with the *already* immense population sizes. All of this has been effectively demonstrated by ecological footprint analysis, which has allowed us to picture more fully the role of affluence in generating ecological overshoot.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, there has been a gradual shift in environmentalism from “demographic Malthusianism” (a strict focus on the number of people) to a kind of “economic Malthusianism” (a focus on the number of consumers). In this new economic Malthusianism the emphasis is not so much on population control, but on consumption control.<sup>3</sup> We are led to believe that if consumers—meaning the mass of the population—can be restrained or their appetites rechanneled all will be well. As Worldwatch’s *State of the World, 2010* report asserted: “Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave . . . we not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in a new era of sustainability.”<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, the new economic Malthusianism comes closer in some ways than demographic Malthusianism did to the intent of Thomas Robert Malthus in his classic *Essay on Population*. Malthus’s argument was principally a class one, designed to rationalize why the poor must remain poor, and why the class relations in nineteenth-century Britain should remain as they were. His greatest fear was that due to excessive population growth combined with egalitarian notions “the middle classes of society would . . . be blended with the poor.” Indeed, as Malthus acknowledged in *An Essay on Population*, “The principal argument of this *Essay* only goes to prove the necessity of a class of proprietors, and a class of labourers.”<sup>5</sup> The workers and the poor through their excessive consumption, abetted by sheer numbers, would eat away the house and home (and the sumptuous dinner tables) of the middle and upper classes. He made it clear that the real issue was who was to be allowed to join the banquet at the top of society:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work upon the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour. . . . The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is turned into scarcity. . . . The guests learn too late their error, in counteracting those strict orders to all intruders, issued by the great mistress of the feast, who, wishing that all her guests should have plenty, and knowing that she could not provide for unlimited numbers, humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full.<sup>6</sup>

A counterpart to Malthus's argument in this regard was his treatment, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, of the problem of effective demand, the lack of which was in his view the explanation for economic gluts or crises. In Malthus's aristocratic view—he was a Protestant parson aligned primarily with the landed classes of the aristocracy and gentry—this did not provide a justification for increasing the wages and consumption of the poorer classes. Rather the answer to the shortage of effective demand was to be found largely in the excess luxury consumption of the landed classes, who supported the overall economy through their overconsumption.<sup>7</sup> If Malthus's theory of population and his theory of effective demand seemed somewhat opposed to each other in their economic logic, the overall consistency of his analysis lay in its unitary class perspective.

Today's economic Malthusianism within environmental discourse is similar in the unitary class perspective that it offers. It is all about making mass consumption and hence the ordinary consumer (not the wealthy few) the culprit. It insists that the average consumer be encouraged to restrain his/her consumption or else that it be rechanneled toward beneficial ends: green shopping. It is thus the masses of spendthrift consumers in the rich countries and the teeming masses of

emerging consumers in China and India that are the source of environmental peril.<sup>8</sup>

A good example of this switch from demographic to economic Malthusianism can be found in the Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World, 2010*, subtitled, *Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*. Based in Washington, D.C., the Worldwatch Institute was established in 1974 by environmentalist Lester Brown and earned a reputation as one of the premier mainstream environmental think tanks, particularly with the publication of its annual *State of the World* reports beginning in 1984. Funding for its operations has come primarily from foundations, such as (most recently) the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. *State of the World* reports over the years have normally been constructed in a similar way: a series of chapters on different aspects of the developing world ecological crisis, followed by a final chapter offering suggestions on ways out of the crisis, usually focusing on sustainable business and sustainable technology.

Yet the *State of the World, 2010* marks a sharp divergence in this respect. In this year's report there are no chapters on the developing environmental problem. Instead the entire report, aside from a six-page chart on the historical chronology of the ecological threat, is devoted to what would previously have been consigned to the conclusion: a strategy of change, focusing on sustainable consumption. Moreover, this reflects a larger transformation in the basic thrust of Worldwatch that has been going on for some time: a shift from its previous demographic Malthusianism, emphasizing the mass population problem, to its current economic Malthusianism, emphasizing the mass consumption problem.

Much of what constitutes the *State of the World, 2010* is of course unobjectionable from a radical environmental standpoint. Yet the overall thrust is to suggest that the principal environmental problem today can be traced to the economy *via consumers*. Indeed, the environmental impact of society is viewed as beginning and ending with "The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures"—the title of the main the-

matic essay of *State of the World, 2010*, by Erik Assadourian, project director for the report. Assadourian sees consumption, even more than population and technology, as the driver of today's planetary environmental crisis.<sup>9</sup>

It is this notion of consumer culture as the beginning-and-end-all of the environmental problem that we will question in the analysis that follows. A genuine ecological critique of the role of consumption in contemporary society, we will suggest, necessitates the transcendence of capitalist commodity production—as the main precondition for the emergence of a new system emphasizing human and ecological needs.

### *The Enigma of Consumption*

Today's dominant economic Malthusianism takes advantage of the semantic confusion generated by two different definitions of consumption. In environmental terms, consumption means the using up of natural and physical resources. It is sometimes referred to in terms of the *throughput* of energy and materials from natural resource tap to environmental sink (the eventual depositing of the waste in air, land, and sea). It thus stands for all economic activity. For example, environmental social scientists Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca argue that “all decision makers along the chain from extraction to end use are ‘consumers.’” It is therefore possible to “construe [all] economic activity as consuming.” Therefore “producers are consumers; production is consumption.”<sup>10</sup>

In economics, in contrast, consumption is only one part of aggregate economic demand—that part accounted for by the purchases of consumers. In a given national economy (abstracting from exports/imports) total demand consists of consumption plus investment plus government spending. Government spending can be seen as consisting of public consumption and public investment. In its simplest terms, then, income equals consumption plus investment. From an economic standpoint, therefore, consumption is merely consumer demand, in contradistinction to investor demand.

Looked at from the other side of the national accounts, that is, output or production, consumption equals the output of the consumer goods sector (Department 2 in Marx's reproduction schemes) as opposed to the output of the investment goods sector (Department 1). Consumer goods thus represent only one part of total output or production.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, from a deeper economic standpoint, there are more fundamental material and temporal distinctions between production and consumption. Production is the transformation of nature through human labor. A good must be produced before it can be consumed. Investment goods, as opposed to consumption goods, are specifically aimed at the expansion of this capacity to produce, and hence at the growth of the economy. A steady-state economy, or a system of "simple reproduction" without growth, as Marx and Kalecki referred to it, is essentially one in which everything is consumed, nothing invested.<sup>12</sup>

By ignoring the difference between these two very different notions of consumption, it is easy to insinuate that the problem of the consumption of environmental resources is to be laid at the door of consumers alone. Yet to neglect in this way the impact of investors on the environment is to exclude the motor force of the capitalist economy. Spending by investors is logically just as much a part of overall environmental throughput as is the spending of consumers. To lose sight of investment in the environmental equation is to deemphasize the role of production, profits, and capital accumulation.

The confusion that the misuse of these two different definitions of consumption generates in the environmental discourse is evident in the common fallacy that by not consuming but rather saving income one can somehow protect the environment.<sup>13</sup> Yet in a properly functioning capitalist economy savings are redirected into investment or new capital formation designed to expand the scale of the entire economy. And it is such expansion that is the chief enemy of the environment.

Another error arising from the blending of these two different concepts of consumption is to be seen in the frequent conflation of total environmental waste in society with waste related to direct household

consumption, that is, taking the form of municipal solid waste (garbage). All too often garbage is treated as a problem mainly associated with the direct consumption of consumers. But municipal solid waste in U.S. society is estimated to be only some 2.5 percent of the total waste generated by the society, which also includes: (1) industrial waste, (2) construction and demolition waste, and (3) special waste (waste from mining, fuel production, and metals processing). This other 97.5 percent of solid waste disposal, outside of households, is invisible to most individuals who, in their role as consumers, have no direct part in either its generation or disposal.<sup>14</sup> As Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay observe: "If we divide municipal waste by population, we get an average of 1,660 pounds per person per year. But if we include industrial waste, per capita waste production jumps to 16.4 tons per person, or 52,700 pounds." If an individual were somehow to cut out 100 percent of his/her household waste, that person's per capita share of total waste would be largely untouched.<sup>15</sup>

Orthodox or neoclassical economists generally assume the existence of what is called "consumer sovereignty" in modern society, or the notion that all economic decisions are driven by the demands of consumers, who then become responsible for the entire direction of the economy. All stages of economic activity, in this view, are aimed simply at final consumption, which drives the entire process. Yet there is a long history of powerful critiques by heterodox economists—such as Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, John Kenneth Galbraith, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy—of the consumer sovereignty thesis.<sup>16</sup> "The consumer," Marx wrote in the mid-nineteenth century, "is no freer than the producer [the worker]. His judgment depends on his means and his needs. Both of these are determined by his social position, which itself depends on the whole social organization. . . . Most often needs arise directly from production or from a state of affairs based on production. World trade turns almost entirely round the needs, not of individual consumption, but of production."<sup>17</sup> Galbraith referred to this as the "dependence effect," whereby "wants depend on the process [of production] by which they are satisfied."<sup>18</sup> In opposition to the orthodox axiom of "consumer sovereignty," Galbraith pointed to the reali-

ty of “producer sovereignty,” exercised by corporations, dominating both production and consumption.<sup>19</sup>

Mainstream environmentalists often acknowledge the force of modern marketing in shaping consumer decisions, and have therefore gone a considerable way in recognizing that the consumer is subject rather than sovereign in our society. Nevertheless, much of the environmental critique of “consumer culture” within today’s environmentalism still falls prey to the “innocent fraud” of consumer sovereignty, as Galbraith called it. Mohan Munasinghe began a recent article in the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* with the words “Household consumption drives modern economies.” Similarly, Randall Krantz declared in a recent article in the same journal: “Consumers are ultimately [the] drivers of demand and consumption.” Solving this problem of the consumer driver “will require,” he insists, “driving consumer attitudes toward demanding better value, rather than resource-intensive ‘stuff.’”<sup>20</sup>

The whole problem of the conflation of the environmental and economic meanings of consumption, addressed here, can be referred to as the *enigma of consumption*. Its significance lies in the fact that while the environmental problem arises primarily from production, in the transformation of nature by human labor, it is increasingly attributed entirely to consumption, which then becomes its own cause and effect. The fantastic world of consumer society, conceived in the abstract, and divorced from the production of commodities in capitalist society, resembles, as we shall see, nothing so much as the “misty realm of religion,” deriving its essential meaning from its thorough rejection of all material explanations.<sup>21</sup>

### *Economic Malthusianism*

In the early 1990s Alan Durning published an important study for Worldwatch titled, *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*. Durning put forward the standard IPAT-formula view that the three factors in environmental impact were popu-

lation, consumption (in the environmental sense, standing for “affluence,” or all economic activity), and technology. He then claimed that consumption was “the neglected god in the trinity.”<sup>22</sup> Today, in contrast, consumption is increasingly seen by economic Malthusians as the preeminent god of the trinity.

There is perhaps no better example of this than Erik Assadourian’s recent “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures” in the *State of the World, 2010*. In advancing his consumer culture thesis, Assadourian adopts a notion of “culture” characteristic of philosophical idealism and various contemporary forms of culturalism. Here culture is an autonomous realm that has no direct relation to material-productive conditions (but may indirectly determine the latter). This contrasts strongly with the “cultural materialism” of a thinker like Raymond Williams, for whom culture was dialectically connected to material conditions, that is, to the human transformation of nature through production.<sup>23</sup>

The cultural systems in which human beings are embedded, in Assadourian’s more culturalist view, are to be defined entirely by “cultural norms, symbols, values, and traditions a person grows up with [that] become ‘natural.’”<sup>24</sup> History is thus the story of the rise and fall of cultural patterns. From this it is a small step to the definition of consumerism as an independent cultural formation, and the explanation of the entire course of Western economic development as a product of this consumerist culture. “Consumerism” itself is defined as “the cultural orientation that leads people to find meaning, contentment, and acceptance through what they consume.” To ask “people who live in consumer cultures to curb consumption,” Assadourian tells us, “is akin to asking them to stop breathing.”<sup>25</sup> In this view, the economy becomes simply a manifestation of culture so economic questions ultimately reflect symbolic choices, as exemplified by consumer culture.<sup>26</sup>

How did such a consumer culture emerge and how are we to understand the history of economic development in these terms? Assadourian gives us the following thumbnail account of the historical developments of the last five centuries:

As long ago as the late 1600s, societal shifts in Europe began to lay the groundwork for the emergence of consumerism. Expanding populations and a fixed base of land, combined with a weakening of traditional sources of authority such as the church and community social structures, meant that a young person's customary path of social advancement—inheriting the family plot or apprenticing in a father's trade—could no longer be taken for granted. People sought new avenues for identity and self-fulfillment, and the acquisition and use of goods became popular substitutes.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurs were quick to capitalize on these shifts to stimulate purchase of their new wares, using new types of advertising, endorsements by prominent people, creation of shop displays, “loss-leaders” (selling a popular item at a loss as a way to pull customers into a store), creative financing options, even consumer research and the stoking of new fads. For example, one eighteenth-century manufacturer, Josiah Wedgwood, had salespeople drum up excitement for new pottery designs. . . .

Over time the emerging consumerist orientation was internalized by a growing share of the populace—with the continued help of merchants and traders—redefining what was understood as natural. The universe of “basic necessities” grew, so that by the French Revolution, Parisian workers were demanding candles, coffee, soap, and sugar as “goods of prime necessity” even though all but the candles had been luxury items 100 years earlier.

By the early 1900s, a consumerist orientation had become increasingly embedded in many of the dominant social institutions of many cultures.... And in the latter half of the century, new innovations like television, sophisticated advertising techniques, transnational corporations, franchises, and the Internet helped institutions to spread consumerism across the planet.<sup>27</sup>

As even a brief sketch of the development of modern capitalist production and the world economy, this account is found wanting.<sup>28</sup> The shift from one mode of production to another is completely absent, and instead we are simply told that in the seventeenth century “young people” pursuing “social advancement” left the land and the town

guild system, choosing instead the consumerist “acquisition and use of goods” as “new avenues for identity and self-fulfillment.” No mention is made of class dynamics, land enclosures, the poor laws, the Industrial Revolution, the steam engine, the new factory system, capitalism, commodity production, colonialism, the world market, and so forth. Wedgwood’s very exceptional role as an eighteenth-century pottery manufacturer, who made use of nascent advertising techniques to reach his aristocratic and middle-class customers, is taken as exemplary of the new system, while Watt and his new steam engine are noticeable in their absence.

This ahistorical account of economic development is replicated in the analytical framework that pervades *State of the World, 2010* as a whole. Missing from the index to the volume, despite its pretensions to describing the rise of consumerism over the last few centuries, are the following terms: economy, class, feudalism, capitalism, commodity, production, proletariat (working class), bourgeoisie (capitalist class), capital, corporations, accumulation, investment, savings, surplus, profit, wages, colonialism, slavery, imperialism, credit, debt, and finance. The growth of consumption, we are led to believe, can be viewed in complete abstraction from such historical concepts and economic developments.

Assadourian’s account of historical agency focuses not surprisingly on elites, specifically on the role of “cultural pioneers” in shifting cultural paradigms, from which economic/market relations are derived. Hence a cultural pioneer such as Wedgwood (an entrepreneur) was, in this view, able to help initiate our current consumer culture, while new “networks of cultural pioneers” (also presumed to be entrepreneurs) can be expected to shift this consumer culture of the future in the direction of sustainable consumption.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, room is left in this analysis for individual action in the form of all sorts of acts of voluntary simplicity (the moral equivalent of the earlier Malthusianism’s “moral restraint” in propagation).<sup>30</sup> But the real emphasis is on elite business managers as cultural pioneers. Assadourian devotes considerable space to how business marketing and the media have stoked the fires of consumerism in the United

States—although he fails to perceive the relation of this to the historical rise of monopoly capital, that is, the economy of the giant firm.<sup>31</sup> In carrying out the transition from the “consumer paradigm” to a “sustainability paradigm,” he contends that private marketing, which pushed consumers toward profligate consumption by taking advantage of their acquisitive natures, can be replaced today with social marketing that could drive consumers to green consumption through the greening of their appetites. At the same time, he myopically proposes that corporations will move away from the view “that profit is the primary or even the sole purpose of business.” Indeed, “a sustainable economic system will depend,” he imagines, “on convincing corporations . . . that conducting business sustainably is their primary fiduciary responsibility.”<sup>32</sup>

The main example provided in *State of the World, 2010* of a corporation that is supposedly moving from an exclusive focus on profits to a sustainable business model as its “primary fiduciary responsibility” is Wal-Mart. A chapter in the volume written by Ray Anderson, the chairman of Interface Corporation, and his associates, focuses on work that Interface (the modular carpet-making firm sometimes seen as a leader in green business) has done in working with Wal-Mart in promoting sustainability. Anderson lauds as a cultural pioneer Wal-Mart CEO (now board chairman) Lee Scott, and the Wal-Mart Corporation in general. Scott is quoted as committing his company in October 2005 to “100 percent renewable energy, to create zero waste” (while admitting, at the same time, that he had no idea how Wal-Mart could achieve such goals). This, Anderson tells us, was followed by a “cocooning” stage in which Wal-Mart confronted all of its networks and suppliers, looking for what it could do to become more sustainable. Wal-Mart is said to have now gone through a “metamorphosis,” reemerging as a green company on a “sustainability journey”—bringing its green values into the “personal lives” of all of its 1.8 million employees, who are being taught to be more sustainable consumers: recycling and eating more healthy meals.

Another essay in *State of the World, 2010*, written by Michael Maniates, focuses on “choice editing” by corporations (cutting out the

undesirable decisions of consumers by removing these individual choices from those offered by business). In this respect, Maniates lauds Wal-Mart for its decision to market only wild-caught fresh and frozen fish that have been certified by the Marine Stewardship Council as sustainably harvested.<sup>33</sup>

Yet this emphasis on Wal-Mart as a symbol of sustainable business and an exemplary proponent of sustainable consumption could hardly be more absurd. Wal-Mart is the world's biggest retailer, accounting for 10 percent of U.S. retail sales, with over 2,700 supercenters in the United States alone, each taking up some 200,000 square feet and occupying (including parking spaces) some 20 acres of land. Its chief concrete environmental commitment, made in 2005, was to become 20 percent more energy efficient by 2013. This would, it claimed, result in it cutting the carbon dioxide emissions associated with its current stores by 2.5 million metric tons by 2013. Yet all of this turned out on closer examination to be a case of corporate greenwashing, since Wal-Mart was at the same time expanding its total operations in the United States and abroad. Its total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, by its own accounting, rose by 9 percent in 2006. The new stores being added in the United States in 2007 alone were expected to consume enough electricity to add one million metric tons to its overall greenhouse emissions, far exceeding any efficiency gains. As environmental writer Wes Jackson put it, "When the Wal-Marts of the world say they're going to put in different lightbulbs and get their trucks to get by on half the fuel, what are they going to do with that savings? They're going to open up another box store somewhere. It's just nuts."

The Marine Stewardship Council, the seafood certification program adopted by Wal-Mart, has, according to Food and Water Watch, a history of accrediting fisheries with very dubious environmental records; nor is it likely that fish could be sourced sustainably on the scale that Wal-Mart demands. Wal-Mart is facing fines for violating hazardous waste dumping laws in a number of states. Although it has announced that it will eliminate non-biodegradable plastic bags for shoppers in its stores, utilize more efficient lightbulbs, and promote greater fuel efficiency in its trucking fleet, it remains notorious for its

extreme exploitation of workers and its virulent anti-union stance. In the end, Wal-Mart is an economic juggernaut—anything but a representative of a new sustainable economic order.<sup>34</sup>

The implications of today's economic Malthusianism are nowhere more apparent than in its truncated treatment of class issues. This can be seen in Assadourian's comparison of consumption in India and the United States. He takes the richest 1 percent of the population in India and compares their carbon dioxide emissions to that of the per capita emissions of all Americans, which are five times higher. This per capita level of emissions/consumption is referred to as "the American way of life."<sup>35</sup> Yet this ignores the existence of sharp class differences in wealth, income, consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions in the United States (and other rich economies), since per capita figures are simply a statistical average of widely divergent class levels, and thus wildly distorting. A similar approach was presented in Durning's earlier *Worldwatch* study. He divided the entire world into three broad classes (based on per capita income in different countries): the consumer class, the middle-income class, and the poor. For Durning all of the individuals in the rich countries (or at least those above the poverty line) belong equally to the "consumer class," which is eating up the world's resources. Although he briefly notes that the top fifth of income earners in the United States have more income than the bottom four-fifths combined, this is thereafter ignored, since the focus is on a common membership in the "consumer class."<sup>36</sup>

The reality is the higher the class/income level the bigger the ecological footprint. In 2008, Americans in the highest income quintile spent three to four times as much on both housing and clothing, and five times as much on transportation, as those in the poorest quintile.<sup>37</sup> In Canada where consumption data is available in deciles, ecological footprint analysts have found that the top income decile has a transportation footprint nine times that of the bottom decile, and a consumer goods footprint four times that of the bottom decile. (All such statistics are invariably distorted by the underrepresentation of the wealthy in the statistical samples.)

Indeed, the class reality in the United States and the discrepancies in environmental impact that result are far more startling than official consumption figures suggest. A relatively small portion of the population (around 10 percent) owns 90 percent of the financial and real estate assets (and thereby the productive assets) of the country, and the rest of society essentially rents itself out to the owners. The wealthiest 400 individuals (the so-called Forbes 400) in the United States have a combined level of wealth roughly equal to that of the bottom half of the population, or 150 million people.<sup>38</sup> The top 1 percent of U.S. households in 2000 had roughly the same share (20 percent) of U.S. national income as the bottom 60 percent of the population. Such facts led a group of Citigroup researchers and investment counselors to characterize the United States as a “plutonomy,” a society driven in all aspects by the rich. In this view, the “average consumer” is a meaningless entity, since consumption is increasingly dominated by the luxury consumption of the rich, who also determine production and investment decisions.<sup>39</sup>

Such a realistic class perspective (even emanating from the financial establishment itself) is, however, anathema to today’s elitist environmentalism. In discussing “sustainable consumption,” ecological modernization theorists like Gert Spaargaren systematically avoid the notion of “relations of production” (class relations) and choose to speak instead in bland systemic terms of “provisioning” and the relation “between providers [green entrepreneurs] and citizen-consumers.” The obvious objective is to reify the fundamental issues—removing all dimensions of historicity and power.<sup>40</sup>

### *An Immense Collection of Commodities*

Karl Marx began his critique of political economy in *Capital* with the words: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities.’”<sup>41</sup> A commodity is a good produced for sale on the market for a profit. It has both a use value and an exchange value. But it is the

exchange value of a commodity, out of which profits are generated, which is of primary interest to the profit-seeking capitalist or corporation. Capitalism can thus be described as *generalized commodity production* with the individual commodity as its cell form. It is a society and economy characterized by “the production of commodities by commodities”—in the sense that labor power is reduced to little more than a commodity, to be bought and sold on the market and manipulated for the sake of profit.

Once the commodity form is analyzed, and its social relations depicted, it becomes clear that production, exchange, distribution, and consumption under the regime of capital is the production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of commodities. Production and consumption, constituting the beginning and the end of this process, are therefore elements of a single process, dialectically connected, and like any organic whole mutually interacting—production, however, is “predominant” since its conditions are “the real point of departure” for the various moments.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, in a capitalist society production is directed to the generation of commodity values (exchange values). Nothing could be more absurd than the conception of a market society in which commodities were autonomous entities, abstract things or “stuff,” simply demanded and then consumed by individual consumers—as if consumption existed independently of production, and use value not exchange value constituted the object of production.<sup>43</sup>

Commodity fetishism, as described by Marx, is the generation within human consciousness of an illusory, inverted realm of commodities, which become mystical entities in their own right, like the gods of mythology, seemingly dominating over human beings—separated from the fact that they are manifestations of *definite material-productive relations*. In today’s fetishized world cultivated by marketing, godlike material powers and symbolic values (love, wealth, power, immortality) are attributed to commodities. Consumption, the market, exchange, and the consumer are thus systematically fetishized. “Commodity reification,” as Fredric Jameson has noted, “has become the central phenomenon in the enlargement and spread of capitalism

around the world, taking the social form of what has come to be identified as consumerism.<sup>744</sup> To detach the reality of consumerism from its fundamental basis in capitalist commodification is thus a major analytical error, a case of what Alfred North Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”<sup>745</sup>

Such reification affects even social scientists: particularly mainstream economists and establishment-oriented environmental sociologists (ecological modernization theorists), who begin and end their analyses with household consumption. “If you proceed from production,” Marx and Engels observed in the *German Ideology*, “you necessarily concern yourself with the real conditions of production and with the productive activity of men. But if you proceed from consumption, you can set your mind at rest by merely declaring that consumption is not at present ‘human,’ and by postulating ‘human consumption,’ education for true consumption and so on. You can be content with such phrases, without bothering at all about the real living conditions and the activity of men.”<sup>746</sup>

A realistic approach to the ecology of consumption would start with Raymond Williams’s remark that far from being “too materialistic. . . . Our society is quite evidently not materialistic enough.”<sup>747</sup> What people are taught to value and consume in today’s acquisitive society are not use values, reflecting genuine needs that have limits, but symbolic values, which are by nature unlimited. Marketing has completely taken over production. Salesmanship, as Thorstein Veblen pointed out nearly a century ago, has so penetrated into the production process that most of the costs of production, associated with designing and producing a commodity, are concealed sales costs, aimed at marketing the product. The goal of the system is what Veblen called “the quantity-production of customers” and not the satisfaction of needs.<sup>48</sup> Products are turned into brands systematically removed from human needs—all for the purposes of economic expansion, profits, and accumulation. Advertising alone (not including other forms of marketing, such as targeting, motivation research, product development, sales promotion, direct marketing, etc.) accounts for between 4 and 12 percent of the sales price of

common commodities such as a Dell laptop, Palmolive soap, Levi's jeans, and a GM pickup truck.<sup>49</sup>

The fact that commodities in today's capitalist society are promoted on the basis of abstract qualities other than their materiality or usefulness, constitutes the basis for what Juliet Schor has called "the materiality paradox." In Schor's words, "The materiality paradox says that when consumers are most hotly in pursuit of non-material meanings, their use of material resources is greatest."<sup>50</sup> The recognition of such a materiality paradox can be traced all the way back to antiquity. As Epicurus put it: "Wealth based on nature is delimited and easily provided, whereas that based on empty beliefs plunges out to infinity."<sup>51</sup> Today this "bad infinity"—to use a Hegelian term—is omnipresent.<sup>52</sup> A society dominated by such non-material meanings (abstract value) encourages economic and environmental waste, a throwaway culture, a fashion cycle extending to more and more commodities, and so forth. Under genuine materialism products would be desired, as William Morris insisted, solely for their usefulness and their beauty—taking into account also their relation to the physical environment.<sup>53</sup>

The entire system of marketing, in which trillions of dollars are spent persuading individuals to buy commodities for which they have no need, and no initial desire, would have to be dismantled if the object were to generate a genuine ecology of consumption. Today's gargantuan marketing system (which now includes detailed data on every U.S. household) is the most developed system of propaganda ever seen, a product of the growth in the twentieth century of monopoly capitalism. It is not a system for expanding choice but for controlling it in the interest of promoting ever-greater levels of sales at higher profits. It is therefore aptly referred to by Michael Dawson as "the consumer trap." The production of high-quality goods increases production costs and decreases sales (since the products thereby do not have to be replaced as often) and this goes against the goals of capital. The general thrust is the production of commodities that are inexpensive and low quality and frequently replaced.<sup>54</sup> In recent decades, the consumer trap has merged with the debt trap in which ordinary work-

ing people are more and more enmeshed—part of the growth in our time of monopoly-finance capital—in their attempts simply to maintain their “standards of living.”

### *Socialism and Plenitude*

Society is an organic whole, from which we abstract for purposes of investigation. Production and consumption, as elements of this unity, belong to a single metabolism. In a non-alienated social and ecological condition, production and consumption represent a mutually reinforcing metabolism (in a relation of reciprocal exchange with nature) constituted at all times by sustainable human needs.

The recognition of the necessary dialectical relation between production and consumption (encompassing as well their natural preconditions) is the key to the creation of a more ecological society. A vision of sustainable development means focusing on human relationships, sensuous experience, and qualitative development. A genuine ecology of consumption—the creation of a new system of sustainable needs-generation and satisfaction—is only possible as part of a new ecology of production, which requires for its emergence the tearing asunder of the capitalist system, and its replacement with a new human whole. The goal would be a society that is mindful of natural limits in which production and consumption would be focused on collective needs and human development. Moreover, this could only be achieved in a context of community, that is, in a relation of reciprocity—and thus in metabolic relation with nature as a whole.<sup>55</sup> The latter aspect is crucial. “We abuse land,” Aldo Leopold wrote, “because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we begin to see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”<sup>56</sup>

It follows that real sustainable development is not about sustaining economic accumulation and growth but about sustainable human development and the maintenance of the conditions of life for the millions of other species on Earth. This necessitates the rational, scientif-

ic regulation of the human metabolism with nature so as to maintain the fundamental conditions of life.<sup>57</sup> It involves planning to ensure that the basic human needs of nutritious food, adequate housing, clean water, and the conditions of a healthy existence are available for all.<sup>58</sup> But the ultimate goal is the rich development of individual human powers, which is possible for each and every person only through the development of the wealth of human capacities and needs in accord with natural conditions. This requires the creation of free, disposable time, and a distancing of society from the treadmill of production. Time would no longer be regarded as money but as lived experience.

The reality of ecological overshoot in modern society tells us that the wealthiest countries and the world as a whole must enter what classical economists called a “stationary state,” that is, become no-growth (even degrowth) economies. This means bringing mere quantitative growth (in aggregate terms as currently measured) to a halt in the rich countries, and then reversing growth, while at the same time qualitatively expanding the range of human capacities and possibilities and the diversity of nature.<sup>59</sup> More specifically, in terms of the present system, the imperative is to bring capital accumulation as such to a halt. But such a cessation of accumulation as a necessary prerequisite to solving the ecological problem is not possible for the regime of capital itself, since it contradicts its internal logic. A drastic slowdown or cessation of net capital formation under the present system means economic crisis, with the heaviest costs being imposed on those at the bottom.<sup>60</sup>

The necessary shift from a quantitative to a qualitative economy—which must start immediately if the world is to move away from the present “business-as-usual” path toward planetary ecocide—requires the progressive dismantling of the regime of capital, and the construction brick by brick of a new organic social and ecological system in its place. This means a radical confrontation with the logic of capital at all points in the society. Capital’s private domination over disposable time needs to be turned into a *new social allocation of disposable time*—increasing the numbers of those with gainful employment by reducing average working hours, thereby making

possible human development. Such changes will require a revolutionary transformation in the dominant social values associated with current material relations, and indeed a transformation of these material relations themselves.

“Nothing is enough,” Epicurus wrote, “to someone for whom enough is little”—thereby questioning the entire spirit of capitalism almost two millennia before its emergence. It is this irrational drive of capital, the unlimited quest for ever-greater private riches, divorced from and even at the expense of real public wealth, that needs to be transcended.<sup>61</sup>

Juliet Schor has employed the concept of “plenitude” in describing a sustainable ecological future. Plenitude is meant to stand for the wealth and diversity of relationships, divorced from our usual way of looking at development in terms of GDP growth and the increase in financial assets. It recognizes that the social goal should be to gain greater distance from the current treadmill of accumulation. For Schor a social economy geared to plenitude is one that focuses on: (1) “diversify[ing] out of the market,” (2) “self-provision,” (3) “true materialism,” and (4) “investments in one another and our communities.” More specifically, her analysis emphasizes individuals voluntarily diversifying out of the corporate economy by concentrating on their “time wealth” rather than monetary wealth; choosing to *self-provision* (even homesteading) in basic areas such as food, housing, and clothing; focusing on *true materialism* by seeking useful, durable goods, and avoiding waste; and seeking voluntary, sustainable *investments in one another and our communities*.<sup>62</sup>

A socialist concept of ecological plenitude would embrace many of these same notions of a rich, diverse, and more qualitative existence, focusing on social needs satisfaction and human development, and at the same time abandoning the largely voluntaristic perspective, which is a hindrance to their achievement. Instead it would promote a genuine, mass-based structural transformation in the workings of modern society in the interest of human communities. Here it is not a question of individuals seeking simply to withdraw from the capitalist economy, but rather one of creating *a new ecological hegemony* within civil soci-

ety aimed at transforming the entire structure of production and consumption in the context of capitalism's accelerating structural crisis. In this context, it makes sense to discuss not just "diversifying out" of the dominant economy (a strategy aimed mainly at the middle class in Schor's analysis, which fails to challenge the dominant relations of production and economic system and lends itself to co-optation) but the creation of new core of non-alienated productive relations within society as a whole. A modern, sustainable, steady-state economy is only possible through the transformation of the social formation itself with the rise of a new hegemonic ecology. Its governing principle must be a new "culture of substantive equality," without which the creation of a genuinely sustainable society, based on the reciprocity between human beings and humanity and nature, is impossible.<sup>63</sup>

But from whence is this new ecological hegemony to arise? The only conceivable answer is through the organization on socialist principles of an ecological and social counter-hegemony, deriving its impetus from various social actors. A new ecological materialism arising in the revolt against the global environmental crisis must merge with the old class-based materialism of socialism—a synthesis made possible by the deep ecological, as well as economic, roots of classical Marxism and socialism. Such a new historic bloc, in the Gramscian sense, would unite the contradictory and discordant ensemble of relations of resistance flowing out of "superstructures" and productive "bases" (revolutionizing at one and the same time culture and material conditions).<sup>64</sup> It would draw on various classes and class fractions (including the critical intelligentsia), but would depend fundamentally on the working class(es)—though not so much today on the *industrial proletariat* as such, but on a wider *environmental proletariat*, giving rise to a much broader, and at the same time more unified, material-ecological revolt. This revolutionary possibility was already implicit in the earliest works of Marxism, such as Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England*.<sup>65</sup>

The socialist struggles of the twenty-first century in Latin America and elsewhere are taking place based on the emergence of a revolutionary historic bloc that draws on both traditional worker struggles

and a wider ecological and communal consciousness. More collective forms of production and more communal forms of consumption are being advanced, aimed at the genuine needs of communities, while increased emphasis is being placed on ecological sustainability. As María Fernanda Espinosa, Minister of Heritage in Ecuador, stated in Cochabamba on April 20, 2010, the world ecological crisis is a “symptom of the development model of the world capitalist system and its logic and destructive relationships.” A realistic attempt to address ecological problems thus involves finding new ways of building an economy and interacting with nature, based on socialist and indigenous principles, in which we “accumulate no more,” while at the same time improving the human condition. In any true ecological revolution, “the answers to the structural crisis of climate change and the problems of the world must be of the same order—structural, revolutionary, deep.”<sup>66</sup> An ecology of consumption is only possible based on an ecology of production aimed at sustainable human development. Herein lies the future of socialism and the earth in our time.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE ECOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

1. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs* (London: Penguin, 1962), 121–22
2. See Richard York, Eugene A. Rosa, and Thomas Dietz, “Footprints on the Earth: The Environmental Consequences of Modernity,” *American Sociological Review* 68/2 (2003): 279–300 and “A Rift in Modernity?: Assessing the Anthropogenic Sources of Global Climate Change with the STIRPAT Model,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 23/10 (2003): 31–51; Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1996).
3. The term “economic Malthusianism” is applied in this way to explain the shift in the Malthusian argument from overpopulation to overconsumption in Democratic Socialist Perspective, “Symptoms and Causes of the Environmental Crisis,” <http://www.dsp.org.au/node/87>, accessed June 15, 2010.
4. Worldwatch Institute, *The State of the World, 2010* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), back cover.
5. Thomas Robert Malthus, *Pamphlets* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970), 18; Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population and a Summary View of the Principle of Population* (London: Penguin, 1970), 177.
6. Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population; or a View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness; With an Inquiry into Our Prospects Respecting the Future Removal or Mitigation of the Evils which it Occasions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), vol. 2, 127–28. For a systematic critique of Malthus from an environmental perspective see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 81–104.
7. Thomas Robert Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), vol. 1, 463–90. See also David Ricardo, *Notes on Malthus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928), 232–46.
8. Lester Brown’s emphasis in the late 1990s on China’s food needs had shifted a decade later to the threat of China in terms of the consumption of oil and its ownership of cars and the effect on the world environment.

- Compare Lester Brown, *Who Will Feed China?* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) to Lester Brown, *Plan B 2.0* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).
9. Erik Assadourian, “The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” in Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World, 2010* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 7.
  10. Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, “Confronting Consumption,” and Thomas Princen, “Consumption and Its Externalities,” in *Confronting Consumption*, ed. Princen, Maniates, and Conca (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 16–17, 30; Annie Leonard, *The Story of Stuff* (New York: Free Press, 2010), xxix. Princen, Maniates, and Conca recognize that the perspective of environmental consumption means that it is not just final consumers in the economic sense that are at fault. But they make little or no use of this insight.
  11. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1978), 468–602. On the relation between Marx’s departments and the Keynesian aggregates see Shigeto Tsuru, “Keynes versus Marx: The Methodology of Aggregates,” in *Marx and Modern Economics*, ed. David Horowitz (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 168–202, and Michal Kalecki, “The Marxian Equations of Reproduction and Modern Economics,” in *The Faltering Economy: The Problem of Accumulation under Monopoly Capitalism*, ed. John Bellamy Foster and Henryk Szlajfer (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 159–66.
  12. See John Bellamy Foster, “Marxian Economics and the State,” in Foster and Szlajfer, *The Faltering Economy*, 340–41.
  13. It is worth noting that some segments of the anti-consumerism movement advocate that people should *earn* less and spend less, and thus don’t necessarily save more.
  14. Leonard, *The Story of Stuff*, 185–87; Joel Makower, “Calculating the Gross National Trash,” March 20, 2009, <http://www.greenbiz.com>.
  15. Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay, *What We Leave Behind* (New York: Seven Stories, 2009), 290–91.
  16. See the discussion in Michael Dawson, *The Consumer Trap* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 11–14.
  17. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 41–42.
  18. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: New American Library, 1984), 126.
  19. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Economics of Peace and Laughter* (New York: New American Library, 1971), 75–77. See also Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, “Conclusion: To Confront Consumption,” in Princen, Maniates, and Conca, *Confronting Consumption*, 321–26.
  20. Mohan Munasinghe, “Can Sustainable Consumers and Producers Save the

- Planet?,” *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 14/1 (2010), 4–6; Randall Krantz, “A New Vision of Sustainable Consumption: The Business Challenge,” *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 14/1 (2010), 7–9.
21. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 165.
  22. Alan Durning, *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 11.
  23. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.
  24. Assadourian, “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” 3, 7. Raymond Williams has noted in *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) that “in archaeology and in cultural anthropology their reference to culture or a culture is primarily to material production, while in history and cultural studies their reference is primarily to signifying and symbolic systems” (91). Assadourian uses the latter, more culturalist approach, emphasizing symbolic systems, while his focus is on the economic—the role of the consumer. This has the apologetic advantage of separating the issue of consumption from material production, thereby avoiding the realities of capitalism.
  25. Assadourian, “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” 3.
  26. What is being referred to in our argument here as “economic Malthusianism,” because of its emphasis on the average economic consumer as the source of environmental problems, depends heavily, since the role of production is downplayed, on the reification of consumption, such that it becomes *its own presupposition*. The economy itself (or the market) thus becomes simply a product of consumer culture.
  27. Assadourian, “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” 11.
  28. This thinness is also to be found in the one source Assadourian cites here: Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History* (London: Routledge, 2001), where a very few isolated examples of upper middle-class consumption and early advertisements are taken as standing for a whole process of economic development.
  29. Assadourian, “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” 4, 18–20.
  30. Despite side discussions of “voluntary simplicity,” applicable mainly to the middle class, Worldwatch’s economic Malthusian argument, as represented by Assadourian, does not generally adopt the common approach of seeing consumers as capable of solving environmental problems through a kind of moral or ecological restraint, as popularized by the Environmental Defense Fund in its annual calendars depicting ten-point programs—whereby individuals, simply by recycling, conserving household energy, etc., can “save the earth.” (See the critical analysis in Michael Maniates, “Individuation,” in Princen, Maniates, and Conca, *Confronting Consumption*, 43–66.) Rather, Assadourian, like economic Malthusianism

in general, adopts the even more elitist view that consumers must be “driven” by green business entrepreneurs (cultural pioneers) to the right decisions. Nevertheless, the “consumer society” argument feeds in various ways on the notion that it is consumers who are culpable, and the source of the original economic sin.

31. On the connection between big business and advertising/marketing see Robert W. McChesney, John Bellamy Foster, Inger L. Stole, and Hannah Holleman, “The Sales Effort and Monopoly Capital,” *Monthly Review* 60/11 (April 2009): 1–23.
32. Assadourian, “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” 19, “Business and Economy: Management Priorities,” in Worldwatch, *State of the World, 2010*, 18, 83–84.
33. Ray Anderson, Mona Amodeo, and Ida Kubiszewski, “Changing Business Cultures from Within,” Worldwatch, *State of the World, 2010*, 99–101; “Editing Out Unsustainable Behavior,” Worldwatch, *State of the World, 2010*, 125–26. Worldwatch’s admiration for Wal-Mart is long-standing. See the celebration of Wal-Mart in L. Hunter Lovins, “Rethinking Production,” Worldwatch, *State of the World, 2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 35–36; and Ben Block, “Wal-Mart Scrutinizes Supply-Chain Sustainability,” [www.worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org), July 20, 2009.
34. Stacy Mitchell, “Keep Your Eyes on the Size: The Impossibility of a Green Wal-Mart,” [www.grist.org](http://www.grist.org), March 28, 2007; Sarah Anderson, “Wal-Mart’s New Greenwashing Report,” [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org), November 20, 2007; Wes Jackson quoted in Heather Rogers, *Green Gone Wrong* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 191.
35. Assadourian, “Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures,” 6–7.
36. Durning, *How Much Is Enough?*, 26–29.
37. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, “Consumer Expenditures in 2008,” March 2010, Table 1; Michael Dawson, “Transportation Inequality in America,” March 2, 2010, <http://www.death-by-car.info>; Hugh Mackenzie, Hans Messinger, and Rick Smith, *Size Matters: Canada’s Ecological Footprint*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, [www.GrowingGap.ca](http://www.GrowingGap.ca), June 2008.
38. Matthew Miller and Duncan Greenberg, ed., “The Richest People in America” (2009), *Forbes*, <http://forbes.com>; Arthur B. Kennickell, “Ponds and Streams: Wealth and Income in the U.S, 1989 to 2007,” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (United States), Finance and Economics Discussion Series, Working Paper, Number 2009-13 (2009), 55, 63.
39. Ajay Kapur, Niall Macleod, and Narendra Singh, “Plutonomy: Buying Luxury, Explaining Global Imbalances,” Citigroup Research, October 16, 2005, <http://www.scribd.com>, and “Revisiting Plutonomy: The Rich Get

- Richer,” Citigroup Research, March 5, 2006; <http://www.scribd.com>; Robert Frank, “Plutonomics,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2007.
40. Gert Spaargaren, “Sustainable Consumption,” in *The Ecological Modernisation Reader*, ed. Arthur P.J. Mol, David Sonnenfeld, and Gert Spaargaren (London: Routledge, 2009), 322.
  41. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 125.
  42. Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 90–94, 99–100.
  43. The concept of “consumer,” as a way of designating the main economic role of individuals in society, and of the end-point of the economic process, is a distortion, as Raymond Williams and Michael Dawson have emphasized, imparting the ideal role that individuals are supposed to serve from the standpoint of a monopoly capitalist society, where the realization of surplus value (profit) is always a problem because of the lack of effective demand. It neither describes how people think of themselves, or adequately captures the process of the satisfaction of material needs. Although consumption itself is a term that needs to be subjected to critique, the idealization of the consumer constitutes a deeper fetishism. See Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 187–91; Dawson, *The Consumer Trap*, 5–6.
  44. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 266.
  45. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1925), 51.
  46. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 5, 518.
  47. Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 185.
  48. Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Ownership in Modern Times* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1964), 284–325; Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), 131–38. See also Allan Schnaiberg, *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 157–204.
  49. McChesney et. al., “The Sales Effort and Monopoly Capital,” 6.
  50. Juliet B. Schor, *Plenitude* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 41.
  51. Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 33. Translation follows David Konstan, *A Life Worthy of the Gods: The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2008), 47. In the latter work, Konstan explains that in Epicurean psychology the search for “endless accumulation” is motivated by the fear of death and the search for immortality in a world where poverty appears to be “death’s anteroom” (xii–xiv, 44–47).
  52. For Hegel, a “bad infinity” was the notion of a straight line, extending infinitely in both directions, and thus without limits—the epitome of what is now seen as an unecological view. A true infinity, in contrast, was a circle,

- and thus more compatible with what we now see as an ecological worldview. See Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 141.
53. Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, 121–22; John Bellamy Foster, “William Morris’s Letters on Epping Forest: An Introduction,” *Organization & Environment* 11/1 (March 1998): 90–92.
  54. Dawson, *The Consumer Trap*, 132–54. As Dawson indicated on the opening page of his book, the United States spent over \$1 trillion on marketing in 1992 at a time when the U.S. economy was much smaller than today.
  55. István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 739–70.
  56. Aldo Leopold, *The Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), viii.
  57. On this conception of sustainable development, see Paul Burkett, “Marx’s Concept of Sustainable Human Development,” *Monthly Review* 57/5 (October 2005): 34–62; Michael A. Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).
  58. Harry Magdoff and Fred Magdoff, “Approaching Socialism,” *Monthly Review* 57/3 (July–August 2005): 59–60.
  59. The truth, as Herman E. Daly argues, is that “further growth in GNP” (economic growth as currently measured) does not necessarily “make us richer. It may make us poorer.” This is because the public costs of the expansion of private riches are seldom included in the calculation since to do this would contradict the nature of capitalism itself. Herman Daly, *Steady-State Economics* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1991), 100. Indeed, much of what is counted as economic growth is actually the wasteful and unsustainable use of human and natural resources (some of which are irreplaceable). It does not contribute therefore to real wealth or human welfare. See Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 443–92.
  60. An economic slowdown has already occurred in the advanced capitalist economies in the form of a deepening tendency toward economic stagnation from the 1970s to the present, reflected in the current deep economic malaise. In some ways this is currently taking pressure off the environment. Yet this needs to be seen as what it is: a failed capitalist growth economy, which is enormously destructive of both human beings and the environment. It signals that capitalism has moved from creative destruction, as Schumpeter called it, to an era of unqualified destructiveness. It therefore makes even more imperative the shift to a new, rational social order.
  61. Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader*, 39. On the way in which capitalism serves to promote private riches by destroying public wealth (the Lauderdale Paradox) see chapter 1 of this book.

62. Schor, *Plenitude*, 4–12, 99–134. Schor avoids any direct structural treatment of capitalism (equating it simply with the market). She thus depicts the economy in orthodox terms as consisting simply of households and firms. She then claims that growth is not an imperative in the contemporary economy. A no-growth economy thus simply becomes, as in green theory in general, a case of individual choice (169–74). In this sense, Schor’s analysis fits with the voluntaristic emphasis of the “de-growth movement,” which emphasizes “a voluntary transition toward a just, participatory and ecologically sustainable economy.” See Marko Ulvila and Jarna Pasanen, *Sustainable Futures* (Finland: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009), 45.
63. István Mészáros, “The Challenge of Sustainable Development and the Culture of Substantive Equality,” *Monthly Review* 53/7 (December 2001): 10–19.
64. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 137, 366.
65. Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1984); Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, “The Environmental Conditions of the Working Class: An Introduction to Selections from Frederick Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*,” *Organization & Environment* 19/3 (September 2006): 375–88. On the concept of the environmental proletariat, see chapter 18 of this book.
66. María Fernanda Espinosa, “Climate Crisis: A Symptom of the Development Model of the World Capitalist System,” speech delivered to the Panel on Structural Causes of Climate Change, World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 20, 2010, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org>, translation by Fred Magdoff and Victor Wallis.