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FELLOW ENVIRONMENTALISTS ARE WE BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE?
BY DON ALEXANDER

Introduction
In her book, Environmentalism and Political Theory, Robyn Eckersley makes a distinction between "survivalist" and "emancipatory" branches of Green political thought, and suggests that each has a different assessment of human nature. The emancipatory wing, which I have operated in for the last dozen years, has accepted three major premises. These are that people are alienated by the present system and an ecological revolution would liberate them along with the Earth; that a radical and dramatic change in consciousness and culture is possible and is the leading edge of social change; and that a society comprised of decentralized and self-reliant communities is ethically and socially desirable.

However, what if these assumptions are wrong, or at least partially so? Might that require a radical rethinking of our strategies? Let's take a minute to look at each assumption in turn.

Are People Alienated?
What if most people are quite happy with the present social order? What if they enjoy the convenience of fast foods and of being able to fulfill their every whim, within financial reason? Enjoy the mobility of having a car or recreational vehicle, and of being able to travel? Enjoy being able to watch 40 channels on TV or being able to rent videos for their VCRs? Enjoy having discretionary income to spend on a variety of consumer products?

Though I personally have never made more than $25,000 a year, I enjoy all of these freedoms with the exception of cable TV, and so do many other eco-radical. Despite our anti-modernism stance, we still tend to partake in the goodies that modernity has to offer. This fact partly explains why residents of logging communities get upset with urban environmentalists; we are perceived as wanting to deny them the "perks" we take for granted.

Furthermore, most of us by now know the ecological consequences of many of our activities and yet continue to engage in them. (A concern for CO2 pollution did not stop me from driving an old Datsun truck some 6000 kilometers on my last vacation.)

Despite having lived frugally for the last twenty-plus years — recycling, composting and re-using — I know that the "ecological footprint" of my activities is more than the planet can sustain. And yet I continue living my present lifestyle, as do most others in the "developed" world.

Of course, there are those who make it a priority to spend most of their waking hours being "ecologically correct" — who never use plastic bags, who take their own containers to the store, refuse to own cars or live off the grid. But it is a lifestyle, however laudable, that appeals to very few. Why? Because most people are not "John the Baptist" types. They just want to live their lives, go on vacation, buy nice things, eat in restaurants, and enjoy leisure activities when they're not working. Also, they're often pressed for time and tend to opt for convenience over correctness. Like many people, I vacillate between these two poles.

Now, in one sense, we are ethically deficient, because our activities are directly or indirectly oppressive to nature and often to other peoples on the planet. But, in another sense, we are just trying to live our lives, and it's the system's fault that coffee in coffee shops comes in styrofoam or paper cups, or that it's more convenient to use plastic bags, or that it's cheaper to buy corporate food at Costco. (If it were against the law for businesses to sell styrofoam cups, coffee shops would have to supply ceramic mugs, or people would have to bring their own. The same is true of plastic bags.)

Is A Radical Change in Consciousness and Culture Possible?
With respect to the second point, despite all the ecological propaganda on and off for the last twenty years, and the various doom and gloom scenarios, people on the whole have not shown a willingness to embrace the ecological millennium. Notwithstanding the need for more edu-
ication, why is that? Probably it's because, for most of us — unless we happen to be a Newfoundland cod fisher, or an inhabitant of the Amazon rainforest — the global environmental crisis is not something very palpable as yet, something that smacks us in the face in our day-to-day lives. For most of us, the most immediate impact of the global crisis is the fact that we have to put on sun screen when we go outside.

Perhaps, rather than being revolutionaries-in-waiting, people are conservative creatures who just want to get along in life and have a modicum of fun along the way. They don't want to move mountains or build utopias. They just want to make ends meet, have kids, live in communities, and hang out with their friends. That being the case, as long as the old way "works" in a daily, immediate sense, they will cling to it. It's only when it ceases to be operable — when some calamity or personal crisis throws their lives up in the air — that they will contemplate change, perhaps even radical change.

**Can We Collectively Go "Back to the Land"?**

With respect to the third premise, many of us eco-radicals have basically been opposed to modernity. Our vision of an ecological society is one of relatively small, decentralized self-reliant communities, in which families or communities grow their own food, produce much of their own energy, and engage in handicraft production. The closest approximation to this ideal in present-day society is the "back-to-the-land" movement, which forms the social base for much of bioregionalism. But most of us are too de-skilled or lack the inclination for such a lifestyle.

Whether we like it or not, in modern industrial society, most of us are highly dependent on complex institutional systems — on a social "incubator." We can't wish that away; we have to work with it. However objectionable the values of modernity are in many ways, there is a rational kernel to people's embrace of them. Most of us anti-moderns embrace them too — at least in practice. These values include: convenience, avoidance of hard physical labour, physical safety, leisure, privacy, and personal freedom — however much the system may fail to deliver in practice.

While recognizing the pernicious aspects of modernist values — their tendency to breed ecological disconnectedness, amoral consumerism and obsession with the material over the spiritual — as long as people are unwilling to part with them we have to find some way of working with them. It is at least theoretically possible to build an ecological society with minimal throughput that meets some or all of people's expectations. But it requires ingenuity and a considerable difference in the way we engineer our complex systems — our social incubator.

**What Are the Dynamics of Social Change?**

In thinking about how to make the transition to a sustainable society we must consider the dynamics involved in social change, and also those involved in personal change. Broadly speaking, there are three elements involved in the evolution of societies: ideology, social organization, and economy (technology being included in the latter). While all three are of equal importance, one may be playing a causally determining role at a given moment in history.

Consider, for instance, the roles played by the Renaissance, the Reformation, the "Scientific Revolution" and the Enlightenment in preparing the ground ideologically for capitalism and industrialism. Without them, the exploitation of new technologies and overseas colonialism would not have been pursued with such zeal and conviction.

Nor is there any denying the role of the capitalist economy in inculcating the mindset of consumerism in people who had formerly been imprinted with values of thrift, self-sufficiency and avoidance of waste.

And, finally, consider the role played by changing social organization (two breadwinners or single parent families) in fostering the cult of convenience, and the growth of a service industry to meet needs formerly provided by stay-at-home mums.

If we take these three elements — ideology, social organization, and economy — and reduce them to the more simplistic notions of values, lifestyle, and work we can see that each has played an important role in the development of current patterns of consumption.

For instance, people have come to value convenience over the health of the planet's ecosystems. This is reinforced by the lifestyles that people are forced (or choose) to lead, and these in turn are influenced by the demands of their busy work lives.

An obvious example is the need in many families to have two breadwinners, and for them to commute some distance to their jobs, since people often work in communities different from where they live.

Corresponding to each of the above elements is a strategy based on an understanding of the pressure points for change. If values are central, one would wish to focus on education to change values. If lifestyle is key, one would focus on constructing a system of incentives and disincentives to foster a change in lifestyle. If work and production are central, one would seek to install a regime of coercive penalties to force businesses to stop producing in a wasteful or ecologically destructive fashion. One might also legislate changes to facilitate electronic commuting and work schedule flexibility.

While all three may be of equal significance over the longer term, in any given historical period one causal factor may play a more pivotal role. Over the last 25 years, people have been exposed to fairly massive doses of environmental education. That notwithstanding — and despite successes with blue box recycling — the average North American today consumes more resources and produces more waste than in 1970.

In terms of lifestyle, people have gotten more busy not less, and more parents are working outside the home each year. With each wave of environmentalist enthusiasm and consciousness, producers have been pushed to adopt changes in the way products are produced and marketed, but these are often short-lived, and overall pollution levels are higher and resource use more intensive. While none of the three strategies have proven extraordinarily effective, the evidence would suggest that our renewed efforts need to focus more on production and lifestyle, while acknowledging that much remains to be done in the educational realm.

Take as an example our current dependence on the automobile. Despite the fact that people (myself included) have been educated about the destructive effects of driving a car, most of us still do. In fact, there is no trend away from single-car occupancy, people are driving more
passenger miles than ever, and use of mass transit is down. This is related to lifestyle, the cost of living, and the patterns of urban development. To own homes, people are willing to commute from further out. In many families, both parents need cars to get to work, commercial areas are often located far from residential areas, and a generation has been raised for whom driving is more natural than walking.

While people have thoroughly internalized the values of mobility, convenience, and instant gratification associated with the automobile, the institutional structure would require radical revision before abandoning the car would become eminently feasible. Moreover, it's no exaggeration to say that the auto industry is one of the key pillars of the whole capitalist economy. This suggests that activists need to focus more on incentives/disincentives (credits, taxes, and subsidized mass transit) and coercion (strict regulation of industry), and must develop a strategy for the gradual "conversion" of physical plant and labour force from auto manufacture to other more socially and ecologically beneficial forms of production.

This, in turn, raises the issue of the relationship between systems and individuals. What I've been suggesting is more attention to system change and less emphasis on personal responsibility. But there is a danger here. At what point do we begin to treat people like Skinnerian rats — to be manipulated and coerced into the appropriate behaviour, rather than being active contributors to a cultural revolution?

Even if we wanted to rely on the former approach, it wouldn't really be possible. There is a reciprocal relationship between institutional change and individual change. To impose coercive measures on industry — with its implications for employment — or to legislate a structure of incentives or disincentives requires enormous popular support, given the inevitability of resistance.

Thus, the three strategies — education, incentives, and coercion — are very much related. Every effort to initiate change through legislative reforms, or even consumer boycotts, presents an opportunity for and requires education in order to win popular support. Similarly, every educational effort can and should raise the issue of the types of institutional changes needed to foster more environmentally responsible behaviour.

Finally, each strategy, treated as somehow separate, faces a built-in dilemma. Education can reduce itself to harping on morality unless it is feasible to implement the required changes in people's lifestyles. This, in turn, is often determined by institutional opportunities or constraints. Similarly, seeking changes in incentive structures or coercive regulations runs up against the question of who will support the required changes, since such support often demands a fundamental shift in public consciousness and values.

**What Are the Dynamics of Personal Change?**

Having spent time on the dynamics of social change, what about personal change? Personal behaviour I feel is determined by four levels of socialization: ideas, values, character traits, and needs.

Take the example of our dependence on the automobile. On an ideas level, we need to educate about the automobile's extraordinarily destructive impacts and make people aware that it represents an inefficient use of resources. We also need to challenge the structure of priorities that causes us to value mobility and convenience over the health of the biosphere and the future of our children.

But much of our addiction to the car is also ingrained at a psychological (character trait) level. It's part of our wanting instant gratification. We need a gallon of ice cream? We can drive to the store in two minutes. To change the behaviour requires a change in our psychological patterning, which in turn relates to our lifestyle and whether we're compensating for a lack of fulfillment in other areas of life.

In the final analysis, the automobile fulfills real needs. In many cases, getting to work would be impossible without it. Moreover, many people without cars feel "trapped" in the city.

Personal change is less likely to happen if only one of these socialization levels gets changed. Many of us know that cars are environmentally harmful; we may even disagree intellectually with the values that the automobile serves, but we still drive or would, if we had the choice.

Rather than merely moralizing against our collective use of the car, it is necessary to get inside the psyche of the user. As any good anthropologist knows, human behaviour is rarely purely irrational. There is almost always a rational kernel motivating our actions.

For instance, the car has a number of attractive features. Already mentioned are its convenience, its ability to take us where we want to go without prior planning, its privacy and comfort, and the fact that it's a relatively cheap mode of transportation. In addition, for women, it is often a useful means for ensuring personal security. One can try to integrate these attributes, wherever possible, into increasingly attractive alternatives, and one can also make the car less attractive by making it expensive to drive, less convenient, and by restricting its mobility.

New taxes, tax breaks and subsidies, tolls, traffic-calming devices, bicycle lanes and outright bans are among the means available for achieving this shift. To implement these changes requires considerable public debate, since people would initially resist any erosion of their present "auto-privilege."

**Connecting the Personal and the Social**

Any type of public policy debate is fertile ground for activists. Issues such as transportation policy invariably connect the public domain (the realm of ideals) to the personal domain (the realm of self-interest).

Especially pregnant with possibilities are those public policy issues that occur at the local level, such as environmental controversies or land use issues. These often connect the realms of ideas, values, character traits, and needs in a particularly effective way, and can enable personal change to occur rapidly. Let me give an example from my doctoral research.

In southern Ontario, a number of groups have sprung up to deal with proposed waste dumps in rural or urban fringe areas. Initially, their only concern is to stop the dump. But over time, they begin to realize the need to consider the way our society organizes and manages waste as a whole. They also begin to look at how they handle garbage in their own lives. The immediacy of having a potentially...
toxic waste dump in their backyard brings the environmental crisis closer to home in a particularly hard-hitting way. Their ideas about what is a rational way to deal with waste change, as do value priorities. A secure, safe, healthy environment becomes more important than the convenience of easy waste disposal.

On a character trait level, they become less committed to the instant gratification - making waste "disappear" - more interested in challenging authority, that of planners, politicians, and experts in general.

On a needs level, they discover that being informed, aware and active changes them in terms of life direction. For some, social change becomes a vocation. Overall their ideas, values, character traits and needs are transformed; a change in one promotes and reinforces a change in the others.

Conclusion
My research suggests that local environmental and land use issues represent a "window of opportunity." They foment personal change — and thereby social change — as apathy, ignorance and dominant values are discarded.

The process is educational in a way that's hard to duplicate through top-down saturation. Though triggered by "external" threats or challenges, it is change that comes from inside the person.

Furthermore, such issues raise the need for incentives, disincentives and coercive measures to tackle problems at a more systematic level. Indeed, many formerly NIMBY groups quickly adopt the attitude that environmental time bombs don't belong in "anyone's backyard." They go on to lobby for more far-reaching reforms and structural changes.

Ultimately, such reforms will not be enough, but perhaps they lay the groundwork for more radical change in the future. At the very least, they provide a "point of entry" for environmentalists to raise issues relating to system change.

Perhaps they also challenge us to rethink the types of changes we want, and that we and others are prepared to accept. Perhaps they require that we rethink our opposition to modernism, and find some way of making peace with its values. Perhaps it means that we have to change too.

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