

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2680>



Environment

# Ecology and Socialism

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV449 - June 2012 -

Publication date: Wednesday 27 June 2012

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**Chris Williams is a longtime environmental activist and author of *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis* (Haymarket Books, 2010).** He is professor of physics and chemistry at Pace University and chair of the science department at Packer Collegiate Institute and is a regular contributor to the International Socialist Review. Alternative Radio's David Barsamian interviewed Williams in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on March 20, 2012, after giving a presentation that Barsamian described as "stunning." Williams' talk and his conversation with Barsamian can be viewed at [www.lannan.org](http://www.lannan.org)

**Among the things that you discuss is the inherent nature of capitalism and its drive for profits, privileging profits over people. What would you suggest as an alternative? You've mentioned socialism. What do you mean by socialism? And hasn't socialism been tried in the Soviet Union and other places and shown to be a failure?**

I think it's been tried once, and it did fail, ultimately. But capitalism has failed many times, and we keep trying that. It's worth giving socialism another chance. I haven't got time to go into all of the details, but the Soviet Union failed for very specific reasons. In my book I talk about some of the earliest time periods of the Soviet Union, in the 1920s, when it had a very different attitude towards ecology. It was one of the first places that you could take a degree in ecology, in 1924. There were huge areas of the Soviet Union set aside as ecological areas, where you couldn't even do tourism or anything; it was purely for research, to see how they could rejuvenate damaged areas of the land. All that was reversed with the ultimate triumph of the bureaucracy, represented by Stalin. So that failed for very specific reasons. But I don't equate socialism with state control. If there's no democracy, if the people aren't making the economic and political decisions, then I don't see how you could call that socialism. So if you think about China or Cuba or North Korea or any of these other countries that call themselves socialist, I would argue that they aren't. You've just got one giant corporation called the state that runs everything. Socialism is about real democracy of the people—in communities and workplaces; production for need, not profit, based on cooperation rather than competition.

In your book you talk about some of the attitudes toward nature. You quote Francis Bacon, for example. I think there is a theological aspect to the attack on nature, with people like Winthrop and his "city on the hill." And to achieve that "city on the hill," it was necessary to exploit nature, which was given to us as bounty by God. Otherwise it wouldn't have been given to humankind.

Senator Inhofe has a similar opinion to that.

### **The Oklahoma Republican.**

He doesn't believe that climate change is real because God has already told him that it's not true. I think that there was a radical change. If you look at the way in which the Earth was viewed, some of the language of which we still retain in terms of the "veins of ore" and so on, the Earth was seen as a living thing in feudal times and before that, because people were much more connected to the land. Capitalism if it wants to make money, has to make machines. That means it has to understand nature. Therefore, you get Bacon and others completely changing the conception. Nature is now not something that we live with and on, but something that needs to be investigated and defiled in many ways. And generations before the emergence of capitalism, people would have seen that as a defilement. That actually was celebrated in very overtly sexually language, by Bacon in particular, as I mention in the book. And I think that rather than a conception of nature in which we need to dominate and control it for our own ends

toward the profit motive, we need to see ourselves as co-evolving, as something equal.

The OECD recently came out with a very shocking report. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, the major economies, came out and said that we may be heading toward a world that is three degrees to six degrees warmer than anything we've seen for hundreds of thousands, millions of years. Most scientists will tell you that two degrees is the maximum that we should be going up to. So they lay all this out "by 2050 we're going to be three to six degrees higher, which would mean the sea levels would be heading toward 300 feet higher" and at the end of it they just say, the effect on GDP will just be a 14 percent reduction. So there are going to be no icecaps "that's literally what they say" there are going to be no icecaps, there are going to be deserts across large areas of the world, but there's only going to be a 14 percent reduction in GDP worldwide. In other words, there's this idea from economists and apologists for the system that we are essentially independent of nature. We can survive without air or water or a planet, and things can roll along as they always have. Clearly, we need to change that radically and think about not just where we're going tomorrow and making money from that, but a much longer-term, future generational thing, which Marx talks about.

And the impact on the most vulnerable. A couple of years ago I was in Nepal. At a place called Kala Patthar, in the Himalayas, the Nepali cabinet met to dramatize the fact that the glaciers are melting. And around the same time in the Maldives, the cabinet met underwater to have a meeting to demonstrate their concern about rising levels of the oceans, which will inundate and wipe out the Maldives islands. Again, the vulnerability of people in the so-called developing world is acute. But some here may be insulated from that while we are busy driving fuel-efficient cars and recycling and doing the right thing, environmentally speaking.

Well, maybe, unless you look at Texas or the wildfires that were all over New Mexico last year, or the unprecedented floods in the Midwest. I think that on the one hand, we are certainly somewhat more insulated, but that doesn't mean to say "I mean, people are already in a desperate situation in many areas of the world and are feeling the effects of climate change already. There are already climate refugees, and there are wars because of the instability that climate change is bringing about in various areas of the world.

Part of this is also about the idea that we can save nature by setting aside little areas called national parks to protect it. Yet how is that going to work if the climate is completely different? How are the animals that feed on other animals or plants going to survive when those things are moving north or south or up mountains? Will the birds be able to migrate and change? Clearly, the whole idea that we can save nature in certain individual locations goes out the window with climate. So we have to rethink the whole climate in a sustainable and rational manner.

I would be depressed about all this stuff if it was the case that we don't have the answers. We actually do have the answers. It's not a technical problem. It's much more about how do we take power from the people who currently have it and put it in our hands so that we can actually start implementing some of the answers that we know will work.

**It was Eduardo Galeano who said, "We have to save pessimism for better times." A bit more about Marx "he's been dead for 150 years" and his relevance today. What is it about his analysis that you find urgent and vital and applicable to the problems that society is facing today?**

I think what's important about going back to Marx is not just the specific things that he talks about, because obviously we can't backdate our concerns to him, and climate change was not on his horizon. But one of the things that he and his collaborator, Engels, were most concerned with was depletion of the soil. In Britain, the fertility of the soil was dropping and there was great concern over what to do. Artificial fertilizer hadn't been invented. They had already raided the Napoleonic battlefields, digging up the corpses of people who died in their wars to take back as natural fertilizer for the fields of England. They had to go further away to go and start wars in South America over

guanoâ€”there were the Guano Wars of the 1800s that Marx wrote aboutâ€”in order to get that fertilizer back to England. So Marx and Engels were very much involved with an ecological question. He was also a great admirer of Darwin.

But beyond that, I would say what's most compelling right now is their analysis of not just capitalism but the methodology which they used. Because so often we're taught in schools that history is not connected; it's a series of disconnected events. That's one of the things that makes history boring. You think that something caused the First World War, and it wasn't connected to the Second World War. You learn about famous people. There's no relationship to what's going on now or your life. In contrast, what Marx and Engels did, their methodology of historical materialism, was to say that everything is interconnected and everything affects everything else. That's a deeply ecological viewpoint.

Furthermore, when he talked about the "metabolic rift," the word "metabolism" had only been recently invented, but it means an exchange of materials in and out of a single cell or an organism. What was revolutionary about the way he used it in the phrase "metabolic rift" is he applied it to the whole biosphere. That is an enormously powerful tool and way of thinking about energy in and energy out, waste, far ahead of his time, and I think is useful today.

Given the extraordinary depth of the economic collapse, with its attendant millions of homes being lost, millions of people thrown out of work, pensions lost, etc., do you see now a kind of Gramscian possibility for an opening for socialism? Do you think there's more space now to even talk about a word that has been viewed so pejoratively in recent decades in the United States? I THINK there's enormous potential. When Barack Obama was first running for election, he was accused of being a socialist.

### **That's the "Change you can believe in" president?**

That's right, the change that didn't come. But when he was running, he was accused of being a socialist because the right wing thought that this would be a negative. It became the number one word Googled, because people were, like, "Well, I like Obama. They're calling him a socialist. I don't like them. Maybe I'm a socialist, too. Let me go find out about it." I think that is significant.

I also think that the economic crisis of 2008 coinciding with the ecological crisis is raising questions in young people's minds and others' that maybe there is a connection between those two things, maybe one caused the other, and so are open to the idea that there are new possibilities. I'm sure you saw the Pew poll that said young people in particular were more disposed to socialism than they were to capitalism because they know what capitalism is like, and who wants that in this day and age? So I think that is something that has woken people up.

I also think that there was a huge change last year with the revolutions in the Middle East. It has just completely changed people's reference point for what is possible. We've had thirty years of defeats. It's been a terrible time since Reagan and Thatcher and the birth of neoliberalism. I grew up in the 1980s, a terrible decade. Very bad fashion; pretty bad music, too, unfortunately, with a few exceptions. But now things are very hopeful again. And people said, "The Middle East, what's going to happen there? A bastion of reaction. Nobody is interested in democracy." Then millions of people on the streets fighting for democracy. Fantastically inspiring.

I went to Madison, Wisconsin, as part of my union to see what was going on there last spring during the uprising and the occupation. It was amazing. Another area of the world, the Midwest, where we are told people are conservative, and that they don't follow politics. People in the Midwest, there in Madison, were learning Arabic so that they could write their signs in Arabic and show their solidarity with the people in Egypt and Tunisia. It was amazing to be in a town so full of pro-union sentiment.

And then, of course, more recently, something I've been involved in, Occupy Wall Street. Phenomenal. It completely changed the narrative in this country. We haven't won any practical victories yet, but we've won an enormous ideological victory. We're not talking about the debt ceiling debate or any other nonsense. We're talking about the rich, the 1%, and the 99%, everybody else, and why we need to get rid of them so that we can run things. That's fantastically exciting.

Indeed, the lexicon has changed. You mentioned the Middle East, a focus first of British and French imperialism, and then their successor, the United States, ever since 1945, having to do with a certain product that is known to be there under its sands. It might be a three-letter word.

### **God works in mysterious ways.**

It's actually a four-letter word in practice, but it's three in actual spelling. Talk about US imperial policy dealing with energy issues and its relation to ecology.

It's an enormously overlooked piece of the puzzle. There are a lot of great writers who write stuff on environmental issues and ecological questions, and this question of imperialism is so often either overlooked entirely or barely given any kind of detailed analysis. I think that's a real mistake. Because part of the big reason why the international negotiations go nowhere is because not only is there competition between individual corporations for power and prestige and profit, but there's also, similarly, competition, economic and political, between countries.

That competition then leads and sparks warfare. Warfare is just as integral a part of capitalism as competition. So if you're not talking about the economic and political competition that goes on between states and their desire to control resources and the geopolitical "great game," as it used to be called, then you're not providing a full analysis for people.

That's one of the major reasons why they cannot get any kind of agreement on climate change. They have a hard time getting agreement on even things that they care about, like trade; but the things they don't care about, like climate change, that is not even part of their frame of reference, they have even more problems with. If I regulate my economy more than you, then I suffer an economic disadvantage. You now can go places and do things and produce cheaper and more profitably than I can, and I'm at an economic disadvantage. That kind of dynamic prevents them from coming up with a rational plan. They'd rather nuke each other over a disputed oil field than come up with an internationally coordinated plan to plant some trees.

### **What are your views on what is called sustainable capitalism?**

Pretty low.

### **Why?**

As Paul Hawken, who is actually an advocate of this, said, it's a contradiction in terms. Actually, he said it about green capitalism, sorry. You cannot have a sustainable capitalism, because every year every capitalist entity has to grow larger for reasons that I mentioned earlier. There is this constant dynamic of growth that if they're not growing, then they die. We see the economy today. What's the conversation about? We need to go back to growth. Every nation on the planet needs to have 2 percent or 3 percent growth. Otherwise what happens? We fall into a tailspin of unemployment, layoffs, cuts to social spending—obviously not the military budget—but everything else. So without that growth the system starts falling apart. Capitalism is literally a system that is based on the maxim "grow or die."

So the idea that in any way that could be sustainable or that they could somehow care about the resources that they put in or the waste that goes out is an impossibility, I would argue. They don't even see resources as anything but a free lunch: they take something free from the environment and then they put it back in as waste. They don't pay for that stuff.

**I infer from that, then, that you are perhaps skeptical of tinkering around the edges, cosmetic changes such as recycling.**

You could put me in the skeptics camp. I'm not against recycling, but I think it's important to recognize that it's the first thing that we're told to do. And there's a reason for that. Because it takes it away from the product itself and says the product is okay, it's fine. The problem is with you as a consumer and an individual. You are the problem because you don't put it in the right receptacle. This evades the whole question of why was that thing made in the first place and why was it made of plastic. There's nothing wrong with plastic. For example, people often talk about plastic water bottles, which is a \$100 billion-a-year industry. Plastic is an amazing material. It lasts virtually forever. So why would you make disposable things out of plastic? It should be illegal. Really, it should be illegal.

**Yes but these are panaceas that are being served up. If you do these things, if you drive the right car, things will be hunky-dory.**

Absolutely. I think the idea is very much ideologicalâ€”that we feel good about recycling, that we take the spotlight away from the production and we focus on consumption, and if we do that, then everything will be okay. However, if you look at waste, only 2.5 percent of all waste is domestic, that is, what all of us produce. So even if we could magically get rid of all of that, that would still leave the 97.5 percent of industrial and agricultural waste. It would be irrelevant, in other words. Apart from the fact that plastic cannot be really effectively recycled in the first place, which is why even if you put it in the recycle bin, 95 percent of it never is. So that would be the last thing that you should do, not the first thing. The first thing should be to look at the production process, and then match things to their function. Then we can go from there and talk about, at the end, if we really can't do anything, if we can't reuse it again, or maybe we should never have made it in the first placeâ€”that's a radical ideaâ€”we should then think about how could we best recycle it.

You can expand that to any kind of argument about this tinkering around the edges and the focus on that. Every time capitalism messes something up, it doesn't try and correct that problem, it just tries to sell you something else. So the food system has become so toxic now that they invented another subset of the food system called organic food. What was wrong with the first stuff? What did you do to that to make it so bad that we have to go and pay more money, if we can afford it, to get organic food? You can replicate that on any number of levels. The food crises, the various food scandals. People may remember swine flu a couple of years ago, where they've concentrated the animals in such horrendous situations, totally unhealthy, that they're diseased, they're incubators for disease. So during the outbreak, what did they do? Did they think, "You know what, we really need to regulate these corporations so they treat these animals more humanely?" No. They just said, "No, we'll sell them sanitary masks, and then that will be fine." So they just are constantly figuring out new ways. So if we accept that paradigm, that there's something else that we should buy, then we've already fallen into their trap.

During the Bush period, it was easy to kind of explain what was going on. These were people with close ties to the oil and gas industry. Yet, as you point out, Obama has followed basically the same template and has expanded and increased drilling permits, and has opened up the Arctic.

It was very easy to blame George W. Bush. In some ways Obama has got away with more than Bush could have got away with in his wildest dreams. Certainly on civil liberties, I think you could say that Obama has been worse than George W. Bush. And I think there's an argument to be made on ecological issues that the same is true. If you think

about the worst environmental disaster in US history, in 2010, the Gulf oil spill. Obama had supermajorities in both houses of Congress and a massive amount of public support at that time. He could have done anything, but he didn't. In fact, he left the clean-up to the criminal who carried it out in the first place, BP. So this is clearly not about changing Democrats for Republicans.

I also think it's important to remember, all of the best environmental laws that we've got on the books—the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, etc.—came about under the presidency of a right-wing Republican egomaniac called Richard Nixon, who had already caused colossal environmental devastation, not to mention mass murder, in Southeast Asia. Why did he decide that now was the time to protect the water and the air? Because there was a massive movement on the streets that demanded it. So that's really the answer. I don't think it's about the politicians; it's about what we do on the streets and how organized we get.

### **The gravity of the multiple ecological crises demands collective and global action—not one-off, one country doing this or that. How do we get there, to collective action?**

That's the all-important question. We've had some examples I mentioned in the Middle East. Also, recently the massive protests in Germany against nuclear power completely changed another right-wing government, Angela Merkel's, who is the premier and who is pro-nuclear. Yet now Germany has already shut nine of their nuclear reactors, they're shutting down the rest within ten years, and there is a plan in place to reduce their carbon emissions by 30 percent by 2020, and then by 80 percent by 2050. That's not because they suddenly became a green government. It's because they were forced to become a green government. I think those kinds of things resonate around the world. The same is true in Italy, in Switzerland, which are also shutting down their nuclear power stations, and hopefully Japan will be the next country.

But I think it's also significant that the countries that are resisting the most in terms of that kind of change are also the countries that have nuclear weapons. Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Japan don't have nuclear weapons. So the movements there have more latitude. I think it would be extremely difficult in this country for the government ideologically to justify keeping nuclear weapons, which they want, but abandoning nuclear power. I think that the campaign here has to be much more powerful.

How do we get to that? I think it's the same as any other movement. I think of Occupy Wall Street; we haven't been fighting for a long time and finally we are. That's exciting. It's finally become a two-sided battle. And we need to catch up with our organization. That is the next challenge as we move forward. Where do we go from here? Because we really are in the belly of the imperial beast. I think it's a question of organization more than anything else.

A lot of people may think or have the idea that they don't need to get involved with politics or political organization. I joined my first political organization when I was fifteen, which was the ANC, the African National Congress, in Britain. That's where the government in exile was. As a fifteen-year-old, I couldn't understand why Black people couldn't have a vote in their own country. It just didn't make sense. So I started finding out more about it. I got involved. Then I joined CND, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. All of these things eventually made me realize that they're coming from the same source, the economic system. So I became a socialist.

### **Around the time of resistance at Greenham Common, the big US military base in Britain.**

Yes the movement in the early 1980s was started by about thirty-five women from South Wales who went to Greenham Common, where they had just started putting nuclear weapons in this US base. They could launch nuclear weapons from Britain without the consent of the British government. So people were, like, "What the hell is this?" So, just as the sit-down strikes in Greensboro, North Carolina, started with four people, the movement against

the Greenham Common base started with thirty-five. One woman was killed during the occupation by a military truck that ran her over, Karen Davis. But it evolved within a few months into an occupation of 30,000, predominantly women, where they ringed the base and shut it down so that they couldn't get trucks in or out. This sparked an international movement, in Germany in particular, to do the same thing. That occupation went on for nineteen years, which is inspiring.

Interestingly enough, I was in Japan in December and January of this year. One of the meetings that I went to, that was run by predominantly women, showed the documentary of the occupation from Greenham Common. Women a generation away and on the other side of the world were inspired by this message and taking heart from it as they went to campaign. So the working class, the people, have a long memory.

### **Do you have some concrete suggestions for people, some things they can do?**

It's not about buying green stuff. It's about getting involved in politics. It's the only thing we have. They have all the money, they have all the guns, but there's not very many of them. We are always more—many, many more. What we need to do is get organized and show our power, because we're the people who make all the stuff. If we don't go to work, nothing happens. So if you're not involved in some political organization, you should think about joining one, whatever is your particular issue. I was first involved in an antiracist struggle, that led me to an antinuclear power and nuclear weapons struggle, that I kind of generalized from. So whatever is your issue, I would urge you to get involved and join an organization and think about how the issues are connected. I believe, as a socialist, it's the economic system that we need to get rid of, the whole thing. If you don't find an organization around here in Santa Fe that you like, start your own. Get some of your friends involved. I think that is the key thing. Because ultimately, as far as I'm concerned, if we don't get rid of this system—and we haven't got much time left—but fortunately, as I said, we've got some inspiration from 2011 that is very, very exciting and points a way forward. But if we don't get rid of the system and implement something else based on cooperation, real democracy, and a long-term perspective, then we face a very diminished future within many of our lifetimes. I've been an activist since I was fifteen, and I think it's the only life worth living.

**As Shelley said, “Ye are many, they are few.”**

<http://www.isreview.org/index.shtml>