

Global warming and capitalism

The Heat is On by Ross Gelbspan

Joseph Tanniru
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The WSWS received the following review from a reader of The Heat is On by Ross Gelbspan (Perseus Books, Reading, Massachusetts. First paperback edition, 1998).

The issue of global warming has received increased attention in the major media, following record warmth in a number of regions of the globe. Studies have been published indicating that the effects of global warming are manifold, and are already beginning to show themselves. While much of what appears in the press is merely speculation, it is becoming increasingly obvious that something must be done to halt the flow of heat-trapping gases responsible for warming—most importantly carbon dioxide, which is released through the burning of oil and coal.

The environmental effects of global warming include increases in sea levels and precipitation; more severe weather patterns (hurricanes, etc.); and greater prevalence of illnesses transmitted by mosquitoes and ticks, such as malaria and Lyme Disease. Potentially more devastating would be the effects of climate change on agriculture, especially in developing nations, which lack the technology that would help developed nations adapt to climate shifts. It goes without saying that the immediate consequences of global warming, like the consequences of other natural disasters, will fall most heavily upon the poor.

The oil and coal industries are major economic forces, and thus the environmental issue of global warming takes on an economic and political character. In order to understand the current and possible measures to reduce global warming, it is necessary to understand how the political and economic factors interact. This is the problem that Ross Gelbspan deals with in his book *The Heat is On*, published in 1997 and revised in 1998.

The politics of global warming

The leading cause of human-produced CO₂ comes from the combustion of fossil fuels, especially oil and coal. At present, oil and coal are essential energy sources for all of humanity. Thus, it is not possible simply to limit the consumption of oil and coal, as was done with ozone-depleting CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons). Indeed, as various countries such as China and India continue the process of industrialization, and as human population in general increases, more energy will be consumed.

In order to curb the process of global warming there must be a change in the means of energy production on a world scale, from oil

and coal to more efficient sources such as solar power. If no societal restrictions were placed on human development, this in itself would certainly be a solvable problem. Already the basic technology exists that would allow for such a change. In a capitalist society, however, the main stimulus for change is not concern for human or environmental welfare, but rather the continual drive for profit.

The major point that Gelbspan makes in his book is that the conflicts over global warming policy are for the most part fueled by the contrary interests of different sections of big business. Certain sections of the capitalist class, most notably insurance industries, stand to lose a lot of money if the environmental effects of global warming are not prevented. There also exists a prominent group of corporations calling themselves the International Climate Change Partnership (ICCP)—consisting of AT&T, Dow Chemical, DuPont, General Electric and others—who have invested a lot of money on research in alternative energy sources and see in an energy source switch a potential for large increases in profit.

Opposed to these groups stand the enormous oil, gas, mining and automotive industries. These industries can strongly influence political decisions in a direct manner via campaign contributions. During the period of 1995-96, oil and gas companies donated \$20.8 million to candidates for the United States Senate and Congress. During the same year, mining industries gave \$2.7 million, and auto industries \$3.8 million.[1] All these sectors have a vested interest in seeing oil, coal and gas continue as the principal energy sources. Their enormous size and capital reserves put them in a position to spend large amounts of money to contribute to politicians, hire scientists, and inundate the public with media campaigns supporting their practices and interests.

Gelbspan goes this far in his analysis. He claims that measures to stop global warming are blocked due to the political influence that these economically powerful industries can exert. Certainly this factor is important. To stop at this level, however, is to fail to realize that oil and coal play a much larger role in the economy of nations than other commodities, and that the effect of these commodities on political processes extends far beyond the lobbying of interest groups. All countries must have a source of energy in order to survive. Moreover oil and coal—to a greater extent than any of the other basic commodities (e.g., agriculture)—are localized commodities; they exist only in certain portions of the globe.

Thus, the ability to access these areas is a major measure of world power. Those nations that control oil can assert themselves on a global scale. The United States has fought two wars in the past 10 years—in Iraq and in Yugoslavia—in which access to oil was a major factor. On the international scale, capitalist competition exists not only between individual corporations, but also between individual nations (i.e., competition between states representing rival capitalist classes).

Because of the peculiar character of the energy commodity and its importance on a global scale, competition between corporations for access to energy transforms itself into competition between nations over world markets and world power. Those nations who currently and potentially have control over oil and coal reserves have a vested interest in maintaining the energy status quo.

Given these facts it is not surprising that every attempt to institute carbon emission reduction measures has proved ineffective. The treaties upon which the international capitalist community has actually reached an agreement have been utterly useless. The Kyoto treaty signed in 1997 was so full of loopholes (euphemistically called “flexibilities” by the US government)—such as “emissions trading,” whereby the industrial nations can buy CO2 credits from other nations whose emissions were below the level stipulated in the treaty—that no basic change could occur. In addition, a viable means of enforcing such treaties does not, and will never, exist. Nevertheless, the treaty failed ratification in the United States Congress, and has proved ineffective on an international level.[2]

In addition to the failure of carbon emissions reduction treaties, oil and coal industries continue to receive subsidies from all major developed nations.[3] These subsidies serve to drive down oil prices, disrupting the “natural” process of capitalist competition, and ensuring that oil and coal maintain their dominant position in the energy market. Within the capitalist system, these subsidies will necessarily continue; imperialist powers will continue to fight over oilfields and world power, contributing to the inexorable development towards future wars and the breakdown of the capitalist system.

The future of the world

Gelbspan’s vision of the future of humanity given his understanding of global warming contains a certain degree of insight, but he concludes with a completely ineffective solution to these problems.

His basic fear for the future of humanity is that “long before the systems of the planet buckle, democracy will disintegrate under the stress of ecological disasters and their social consequences.” Growing social unrest and environmental devastation, Gelbspan believes, will demand extreme measures. “Governments will quickly find democracy too cumbersome for responding to disruptions in food supplies ... as well as to a floodtide of environmental refugees.... It seems a grim likelihood that, as many countries produce more and more people and less and less food, social order—and the freedom that comes with it—will not survive.” While presented in a somewhat distorted manner (he continues to see the state as autonomous, completely divorced from its actual basis in capitalist society) these fears are well founded. The effects of global warming will naturally impact workers and the poor the hardest, which will be followed by a decreased willingness on their part to accept the domination of capital, necessitating strong measures by capitalists.

Gelbspan comes very close to acknowledging that capitalism itself is the problem, or at least that capitalism cannot be relied upon to solve the problem. “What the climate crisis requires ... is a plan not bound by the requirements of the marketplace. No climate plan whose priority is to provide profits or protect corporate competitive advantage will work.”

Gelbspan is led to this conclusion by his more or less sound analysis

of the purely economic factors contributing to the global warming debate. He comprehends the inability of big business to pursue any goals not intimately linked with the drive for profit. What he fails to see is that political decisions are organically linked with business interests in a capitalist society. He bemoans the influence that oil and coal industries are able to exert by means of campaign contributions, etc., but regards this influence as secondary and avoidable. The collusion between business and government, between economic and political interests, is not, however, secondary. The national governments are not autonomous, but function as the representatives of the “national” capitalist interests.

Not understanding the class nature of politics, Gelbspan becomes more and more unscientific as he progresses from a diagnosis of the problem to proposed solutions. His last chapter, “One Pathway to the Future,” is a subjective and empty plea. He calls on humanity to increase its “ethical maturity,” and echoes some environmentalists in claiming that environmental damage must be taken into account in calculations of value. As far as direct policies go, the solution, he claims, is threefold: (1) redirect subsidies from oil and gas to renewable energy forms; (2) if it must be used, increase efficiency of oil consumption; (3) redistribute wealth internationally so that developing nations can acquire alternative energy sources without destroying their economies.

“We” are to redistribute wealth to developing nations. “We” must be ethically mature and take responsibility for our actions. But who is this “we”? Gelbspan’s view of those in power is of benevolent persons, concerned for the overall prosperity of the human race. He does not realize that political decisions are driven by the interests of capital, not by individual leaders, free to be “ethically mature.” None of his positive proposals are possible within the present society, for all depend on an external control of capital that simply does not exist.

The continuing struggle for world power among capitalist nations will have a profoundly disastrous effect on the environment. Within the capitalist system, there is no possibility of dealing seriously with problems of the environment. It is not ethical maturity that is required, but rather the solidarity of the international working class in the struggle for socialism and an internationally planned economy. Only in this way can the crisis of global warming be addressed in a rational manner and a catastrophe for civilization be averted.

Notes:

1. “Oiling the Machine,” Greenpeace. <http://www.greenpeace.org/~climate/industry/reports/machine.html>.
2. For a detailed presentation of the Clinton Administrations position on global warming see “The Kyoto Protocol and the President’s Policies to Address Climate Change,” submitted to Congress in July 1998 by the President’s Council of Economic Analysis and available at http://www.epa.gov/globalwarming/reports/pubs/wh_econ/index.
3. “The Subsidy Scandal” and “Fueling Global Warming,” Greenpeace. Available at <http://www.greenpeace.org>.



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