

Are Greens Really Reds?

by Richard Evanoff

Greens are often accused of being closet communists — “Reds in Green Cloaks” as the *National Review* (U.S.) headlined one of its articles. Redbaiting is also common in Japan, I’ve found out. A group I’m involved with, which is trying to protect the area around Mt. Takao from developers, is routinely labeled “communist” by people who either don’t understand or don’t sympathize with what we’re doing. If you’re not in favor of big business, capitalist greed, profit-mongering, and government collusion, you must be a dirty commie as far as most people see it. There simply aren’t any other alternatives besides the true blues and the dirty reds, capitalism and communism.

The cold war has had a lot to do with this bilateral myopia, but now that communism is dead in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, it’s being replaced with a unilateral myopia that sees capitalism as the “end of history.” The capitalist West has won the war with the commie East and that’s the end of the matter. Capitalism will lead us into a glorious future in which the streets are lined with glitzy advertising billboards and there’s a thick stew of new products in every pot.

The only problem with this scenario is that capitalism isn’t working very well either. Capitalism may have been able to flood the market with consumer goods, but it hasn’t been able to solve the crucial problems of homelessness, unemployment, drug abuse, AIDS, poverty, crime, toxic waste, pollution, and environmental degradation. Do we really think these problems can be solved by the production of more consumer goods and an economic system dedicated not to creating a better society, but to the greedy pursuit of profits? The money spent on advertising alone in the United States would alleviate nearly every domestic social problem that country presently faces. The money currently spent on the military would be enough to solve nearly every social problem in the world (and make the military itself unnecessary). There’s a lot Japan could be doing too. All the money presently being spent on advertising, the “self defense forces” (which is actually the seventh largest military force in the world), unnecessary gadgets, pachinko, and luxury could go a long ways towards really helping to make the world a better place.

It’s time for a third alternative. In an interview published in *Resurgence*, Hazel Henderson (author of *Creating Alternative Futures* and *Redefining Wealth and Progress*) says, “When we look back, we realize that the ideological conflict that went on between communism and capitalism, between the ideas of Karl Marx and Adam Smith, was actually a trivial argument. Both Marx and Smith devised a discipline that led to industrialism and materialism. Unchecked production, consumption, and continuous economic growth are common in their thinking. They both believed in technological efficiency and in big factories rather than local production. Now it is high time to give Adam Smith and Karl Marx a decent burial. This unquestioning faith in industrialism is fundamentally wrong and we need to change our thinking.”

For the past decade or so the international Green movement has been working on a “third alternative” to both capitalism and communism. A familiar slogan of the Greens is “Neither right nor left, but straight ahead.” The Greens question the “industrialism” and “materialism” that are characteristic of both capitalism and communism. They question whether “unchecked production,” “consumption,” and “continuous economic growth” can really led us to a happier future. They question whether the “technological efficiency” and “big factories” of global market capitalism are really the best way to insure the health and well-being of the people, plants, and animals that inhabit this planet.

Capitalism may have been able to flood the market with consumer goods, but it hasn’t been able to solve crucial problems.

This kind of talk makes some people scared because they think that by criticizing modern industrial consumerism the Greens want us to go back to living in caves. Nothing could be further from the truth. As with socialism the Greens emphasize production to satisfy genuine human needs rather than production merely to line the pockets of the already-rich with more profits. This means cutting back on the wasteful consumption that is necessary merely to keep our capitalistic economy going. Planned obsolescence, advertising, and overpackaging all contribute to a growing GNP but they do absolutely nothing to improve our real quality of life. Instead of putting all our energy into producing more and more consumer goods that simply eat up resources and create waste, we need to be focusing on our real needs — housing, education, meaningful work, decent cities, safe streets, healthy bodies, a clean environment, etc., etc., ETC. We need to

direct our attention away from extravagance and luxury towards the things that really matter — and not only in First-World societies, but throughout world. Which is preferable: a world in which everyone has the basic necessities of food, clothing, water, and shelter, or a world in which a small percentage of the earth’s people wallows in jaded, insatiable consumerism while the vast majority of humanity sinks deeper into economic, social, and spiritual despair? Equality is as much a rallying cry for the Greens as it was for the American, French, and Russian revolutionists!

But unlike socialists (or the American or French revolutionists for that matter), Greens do not advocate violent revolution. Nor do they advocate the nationalization of industries or a dictatorship of the proletariat. Instead, they advocate local control over local production. Local *control* means government centered in local communities rather in large nation-states — the same, really, as the old New England town meetings. It means restoring face-to-face democracy, where local residents make decisions for themselves, rather than the imposition of a government- and corporate-dominated “new world order.” Local *production* means producing goods locally to meet local needs, as it used to be in the not-so-distant past, rather than production for profit by large transnational corporations that have absolutely no interest in the job security or environmental quality of local communities. It means bringing democracy to the workplace by letting workers own and manage their own companies (as is actually happening in the growing worldwide producer cooperative and workplace democracy movements). It means replacing the inefficient, wasteful, and degrading global capitalistic system with local sustainable economic systems that are consistent with both a healthy environment and human dignity. It means independence and freedom from the rich and powerful, whether they be the oppressive monarchs of old or the capitalist barons of today — in short, liberty in the good old-fashioned sense.

The Green “revolution” involves overgrowing rather than overthrowing national governments and the global capitalistic system. From the left it learns the values of equality, compassion for the underprivileged, and collective action. From the right it learns the values of individual initiative, personal responsibility, and local citizen involvement. At the same time, however, it avoids both the traditional left’s naive faith that big government (and international governmental bodies) will solve all our problems and the traditional right’s naive faith that big business (and transnational corporations) will solve all our problems. Moreover, the “third way” of the Greens avoids getting stuck in a mushy, moderate middle ground that seeks some kind of “compromise” between these two big (and too big) extremes. The Green movement is moving straight with a genuine alternative. □