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Environmental Ethics

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Ecological Conservation is Anti-Capitalist

Since the beginning of time, species have grown, evolved, and disappeared according to a natural course of creation and dissolution. Five recorded extinction events have been charted in history, all due to intense natural disasters; but the impact of human greed has poised an unprecedented danger to the earth. For the first time ever, a living species is consciously accelerating a mass extinction event, contributing to the deterioration of biodiversity everywhere. The wide-spread mutilation of our planet and acceptance of its demise stems from the ethics and efforts of global capitalism.

The ethics

Biodiversity is the variability among living organisms from all sources including terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are a part, including diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems. Biodiversity provides chemicals, energy, fibers, medicines, raw materials, wood, and more. It also helps with quality of air and water, fertility of soils, “pest” control, and more (Class notes). Clearly, biodiversity is not only a necessary component of life on earth but is synonymous with life itself.

In 1992, the Convention on Biological Diversity noted that because of human activity, genetic diversity is threatened in various ways, life on earth is becoming increasingly

homogenous, and that ecosystem diversity is seriously threatened. According to PBS, human activity has increased extinction rates to 100 to 1,000 times higher than the natural background extinction rates, and biodiversity loss over the past two centuries has reached alarming levels (PBS). But it isn't just a couple of people littering here and there which causes such massive damage. It is the global power ethics of massive corporations and the impossible dream of infinite profit that causes such devastation. This can be observed from a comparative study of the three main goals of the 1992 convention: 1) The conservation of biological diversity, 2) the sustainable use of its components, and 3) the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources. Capitalist ethics almost perfectly contradicts these three goals.

1) The conservation of biological diversity

The conservation of biological diversity is antagonistic to global capitalism. In the past century humans have caused the extinction rate to far exceed the natural background rate. Not only animals, but terrestrial plants *which have survived mass extinctions in the past* are at risk. One primary cause of this is habitat destruction, defined by National Geographic as “the elimination or alteration of the conditions necessary for animals and plants to survive, [which] not only impacts individual species but the health of the global ecosystem” (National Geographic). This is caused by the “clearing of land for farming, grazing, mining, drilling, and urbanization, impact[ing] the 80 percent of global species who call the forest home. Approximately 15 billion trees are cut down each year” (National Geographic). Capitalist ethics *relies* on the destruction of biological diversity; and its conservation can be understood as anti-capitalist.

2) The sustainable use of its components

Capitalist ethics relies on the overexploitation of all things to thrive. Overexploitation, and the failure to allow the natural regenerative processes of nature to work, is one of the major causes of the sixth extinction, currently ongoing. Sustainability, or using things only as needed, with care and gentle process, is contrary to capitalism, which aims to draw as much profit out of a subject as it possibly can.

3) The fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources

Finally, capitalism relies on a disparity of wealth to successfully keep the rich on top and the poor left to rot. Read the line, “the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources” to any capitalist or politician in the scene. They are sure to scoff at you, call you a communist, and other such frivolities. Even a supposed “green capitalist” who cares for the environment in words will not commit to the action of fair and equitable resource allocation. Clearly, sustainability is anti-capitalist.

Capitalism’s hierarchical mentality and disparaging class relations will lead to no happy conclusion. Market capitalism has created the biological crisis of climate change and *cannot* solve it. If anything, it may try to profit from the collision course rather than alter it. This “green capitalism” will not challenge the power of business conglomerates which actively degrade the environment.

The efforts

One example of the efforts of global capitalism to manufacture consent for the destruction of the earth is the carbon-footprint scheme. The idea of a carbon-footprint was coined by big oil conglomerates to blame the consumer for climate change rather than the actual capitalist perpetrators. According to Brad Bergan of Interesting Engineering, “the oil giant British Petroleum (BP) actually hired PR professionals to invent a concept designed to blame

individuals, not fossil fuel companies, for climate change. And it was BP that revealed the phrase “carbon footprint”, along with a “carbon footprint calculator“, in 2004... to promote the slant that climate change is not the fault of an oil giant, but that of individuals” (Bergan). This is only one example of the nuanced threat capitalism poses to our environment and its sustained, systematic destruction.

Hope

Destructive capitalist efforts can be combated with social and ecological progress - two inseparable elements of a free future which include a shift in power away from big business and large political structures to non-centralized and environmentally conscious communities (Class notes). One example of a detailed system for social ecology can be found in Elinor Ostrom’s theory of common pool resources. Ostrom, known for being the first woman to win a Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, demonstrated collective management of resources without government or private control. Her theory is centered around eight unique design principles: 1) Clearly defined boundaries (identity of the group and boundaries of the shared resource), 2) proportional equivalence between benefits and costs, 3) collective choice arrangements, 4) monitoring, 5) graduated sanctions, 6) conflict resolution mechanisms, 7) minimal recognition of rights to organize, and finally, 8) appropriate coordination among relevant groups (Class notes). These eight simple rules for organizing the commons have the potential to realize the goals of the 1992 convention: The conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources. This is a reality that can only be realized through collective imagining and effort.

According to the famous conservationist and philosopher Aldo Leopold, we abuse our planet and resources because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us (Class notes). When

we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect (Leopold). If we do this successfully, we may be able to avoid the tipping point at which our earth, and the integrity of humanity, can never recover.

Works Cited

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