

John Bellamy Foster

GLOBAL ECOLOGY AND THE COMMON GOOD

Sociologist John Bellamy Foster questions the efficacy of much of contemporary environmentalism. He argues that proponents of a "new ecological morality" too often blame individual behavior for our environmental problems while downplaying or neglecting outright the root cause of global degradation: the "global treadmill of production." By focusing on individual consumer choices, or looking to socially responsible business people for leadership, conventional environmentalists offer a relatively comforting way out of our ecological crisis. Foster sees this as a dangerous false comfort. For the treadmill of production—which he likens to a giant squirrel cage—is driven by the six-point logic of our corporate capitalist economic structure, a structure which renowned sociologist C. Wright Mills considered to be the "structural immorality" embedded in our way of life. In short, we need to confront the paradox that our way of life undermines our way of life. Foster asks us to resist the treadmill of production through social movements aimed at creating a "true moral revolution," a revolution that transforms our thinking about the relationship between capitalist economic practices and the environment. Ponder the possibility that anything less than a new ethic of the common good, which inextricably connects environmental values to social justice, may well not be sufficient to save the earth from ecological calamity.

Over the course of the twentieth century, human population has increased more than threefold and gross world product perhaps twentyfold. Such expansion has placed increasing pressure on the ecology of the planet. Everywhere we look—in the atmosphere, oceans, watersheds, forests, soil, etc.—it is now clear that rapid ecological decline is setting in.

Faced with the frightening reality of global ecological crisis, many are now calling for a moral revolution that would incorporate ecological values into our culture. This demand for a new ecological morality is, I believe, the essence of Green thinking. The kind of moral transformation envisaged is best captured by Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which says we abuse land because we regard it as

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a commodity belonging to us. When we begin to see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

Yet behind most appeals to ecological morality there lies the presumption that we live in a society where the morality of the individual is the key to the morality of society. If people as individuals could simply change their moral stance with respect to nature and alter their behavior in areas such as propagation, consumption, and the conduct of business, all would be well.

What is too often overlooked in such calls for moral transformation is the central institutional fact of our society: what might be called the global "treadmill of production." The logic of this treadmill can be broken down into six elements. First, built into this global system, and constituting its central rationale, is the increasing accumulation of wealth by a relatively small section of the population at the top of the social pyramid. Second, there is a long-term movement of workers away from self-employment and into wage jobs that are contingent on the continual expansion of production. Third, the competitive struggle between businesses necessitates on pain of extinction the allocation of accumulated wealth to new, revolutionary technologies that serve to expand production. Fourth, wants are manufactured in a manner that creates an insatiable hunger for more. Fifth, government becomes increasingly responsible for promoting national economic development, while ensuring some degree of "social security" for at least a portion of its citizens. Sixth, the dominant means of communication and education are part of the treadmill, serving to reinforce its priorities and values.

A defining trait of the system is that it is a kind of giant squirrel cage. Everyone, or nearly everyone, is part of this treadmill and is unable or unwilling to get off. Investors and managers are driven by the need to accumulate wealth and to expand the scale of their operations in order to prosper within a globally competitive milieu. For the vast majority, the commitment to the treadmill is more limited and indirect: they simply need to obtain jobs at liveable wages. But to retain

those jobs and to maintain a given standard of living in these circumstances it is necessary, like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, to run faster and faster in order to stay in the same place.

In such an environment, as the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once said, "A man can do what he wants. But he can't want what he wants." Our wants are conditioned by the kind of society in which we live. Looked at in this way, it is not individuals acting in accordance with their own innate desires, but rather the treadmill of production on which we are all placed that has become the main enemy of the environment.

Clearly, this treadmill leads in a direction that is incompatible with the basic ecological cycles of the planet. A continuous 3 percent average annual rate of growth in industrial production, such as obtained from 1970 to 1990, would mean that world industry would double in size every twenty-five years, grow sixteenfold approximately every century, increase by 50 times every two centuries, 4,000 times every three centuries, etc. Further, the tendency of the present treadmill of production is to expand the output of raw materials and energy because the greater this flow—from extraction through the delivery of final products to consumers—the more opportunity there is to realize profits. In order to generate profits, the treadmill relies heavily on energy-intensive, capital-intensive technology, which allows it to economize on labor inputs. Yet increased output and more substitution of energy and machines for labor mean a more rapid depletion of high-quality energy sources and other natural resources, and a larger amount of wastes dumped into the environment. It is unlikely therefore that the world could sustain many more doublings of industrial output under the present system without experiencing a complete ecological catastrophe. Indeed, we are already overshooting certain critical ecological thresholds.

Matters are made worse by the tendency in recent decades to move from "gross insults" to the environment to "microtoxicity." As synthetic products (like plastic) are substituted for natural

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ones (like wood and wool), the older pollutants associated with nineteenth-century industrialization are being replaced by more hazardous pollutants such as those resulting from chlorine-related (organochlorine) production—the source of DDT, dioxin, Agent Orange, PCBs, and CFCs. The degree of toxicity associated with a given level of output has thus risen fairly steadily over the last half century.

It would seem, then, that from an environmental perspective we have no choice but to resist the treadmill of production. This resistance must take the form of a far-reaching moral revolution. In order to carry out such a moral transformation we must confront what the great American sociologist C. Wright Mills called “the higher immorality.” The “higher immorality” for Mills was a “structural immorality” built into the institutions of power in our society—in particular the treadmill of production. “In a civilization so thoroughly business-penetrated as America,” he wrote, money becomes “the one unambiguous marker of success...the sovereign American value.” Such a society, dominated by the corporate rich with the support of the political power elite, is a society of “organized irresponsibility,” where moral virtue is divorced from success, and knowledge from power. Public communication, rather than constituting the basis for the exchange of ideas necessary for the conduct of a democracy, is largely given over to “an astounding volume of propaganda for commodities...addressed more often to the belly or to the groin than to the head or the heart.” The corrupting influence that all of this has on the general public is visible in the loss of the capacity for moral indignation, the growth of cynicism, a drop in political participation, and the emergence of a passive, commercially centered existence. In short, the higher immorality spells the annihilation of a meaningful moral and political community.

Manifestations of this higher immorality—in which money divorced from all other considerations has become the supreme reality—are all around us. In 1992 alone U.S. business spent perhaps \$1 trillion on marketing, simply convincing

people to consume more and more goods. This exceeded by about \$600 billion the amount spent on education—public and private—at all levels. Under these circumstances we can expect people to grow up with their heads full of information about saleable commodities, and empty of knowledge about human history, morality, culture, science and the environment. What is most valued in such a society is the latest style, the most expensive clothing, the finest car. Hence, it is not surprising that more than 93 percent of teenage girls questioned in a survey conducted in the late 1980s indicated that their favorite leisure activity was to go shopping. Not long ago *Fortune* magazine quoted Dee Hock, former head of the Visa bank card operation, as saying, “It’s not that people value money more but that they value everything else so much less—not that they are more greedy but that they have no other values to keep greed in check.”

“Our social life is organized in such a way,” German environmentalist Rudolf Bahro has observed, “that even people who work with their hands are more interested in a better car than in the single meal of the slum-dweller on the southern half of the earth or the need of the peasant there for water; or even a concern to expand their own consciousness, for their own self-realization.”

Reflecting on the growing use of pesticides in our society, Rachel Carson wrote that this was indicative of “an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make money, at whatever cost to others, is seldom challenged.”

Given the nature of the society in which we live, one must therefore be wary of solutions to environmental problems that place too much emphasis on the role of individuals, or too little emphasis on the treadmill of production and the higher immorality that it engenders. To be sure, it is necessary for individuals to struggle to organize their lives so that in their consumption they live more simply and ecologically. But to lay too much stress on this alone is to place too much onus on the individual, while ignoring institutional facts. Alan Durning of the Worldwatch Institute, for ex-

ample, argues that obligations to the environment are being eroded as we climb the ladders of economic growth, our home improvement projects, and our

This is a society that ignores the United Nations treaties that target advertising and marketing watches. It is estimated that about 75 percent of the largest corporations in the world are based in the United States. The assumption of this system is that we should think that getting a car and instead investing in a car is a waste of money, and instead investing in a car is a waste of money.

Even the assumption that the mental development of the general public is the top priority of the system is in question. Thus in his book *Commercialism and the Environment*, Ronald Reagan writes that after ecological concerns, suggesting that business is the primary concern within an industrial society. “The ultimate goal should not be merely a simple promise of well-being but a more active involvement in the process of change.”

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ample, argues that “we consumers have an ethical obligation to curb our consumption, since it jeopardizes the chances for future generations. Unless we climb down the consumption ladder a few rungs, our grandchildren will inherit a planetary home impoverished by our affluence.”

This may seem like simple common sense but it ignores the higher immorality of a society like the United States in which the dominant institutions treat the public as mere consumers to be targeted with all of the techniques of modern marketing. The average adult in the United States watches 21,000 television commercials a year, about 75 percent of which are paid for by the 100 largest corporations. It also ignores the fact that the treadmill of production is rooted not in consumption but in production. Within the context of this system it is therefore economically naive to think that the problem can be solved simply by getting consumers to refrain from consumption and instead to save and invest their income. To invest means to expand the scale of productive capacity, increasing the size of the treadmill.

Even more questionable are the underlying assumptions of those who seek to stop environmental degradation by appealing not to individuals in general but to the ethics of individuals at the top of the social pyramid and to corporations. Thus in his widely heralded book, *The Ecology of Commerce*, Paul Hawken argues for a new environmental ethic for businesspeople and corporations. After advocating an ambitious program for ecological change, Hawken states, “Nothing written, suggested, or proposed is possible unless business is willing to embrace the world we live within and lead the way.” According to Hawken, “the ultimate purpose of business is not, or should not be, simply to make money. Nor is it merely a system of making and selling things. The promise of business is to increase the general well-being of humankind through service, a creative invention and ethical philosophy.”

Thus he goes on to observe that, “If Dupont, Monsanto, and Dow believe they are in the synthetic chemical production business, and cannot change this belief, they and we are in trouble. If

they believe they are in the business to serve people, to help solve problems, to use and employ the ingenuity of workers to improve the lives of people around them by learning from the nature that gives us life, we have a chance.”

The central message here is that business people merely have to change the ethical bases of their conduct and all will be well with the environment. Such views underestimate the extent to which the treadmill of production and the higher immorality are built into our society. Ironically, Hawken’s argument places too much responsibility and blame on the individual corporate manager—since he or she too is likely to be a mere cog in the wheel of the system. As the great linguistics theorist and media critic Noam Chomsky has explained, “The chairman of the board will always tell you that he spends his every waking hour laboring so that people will get the best possible products at the cheapest possible price and work in the best possible conditions. But it is an institutional fact, independent of who the chairman of the board is, that he’d better be trying to maximize profit and market share, and if he doesn’t do that, he’s not going to be chairman of the board any more. If he were ever to succumb to the delusions that he expresses, he’d be out.”

To be successful within any sphere in this society generally means that one has thoroughly internalized those values associated with the higher immorality. There is, as economist John Kenneth Galbraith has pointed out, a “culture of contentment” at the top of the social hierarchy; those who benefit most from the existing order have the least desire for change.

Resistance to the treadmill of production therefore has to come mainly from the lower echelons of society, and from social movements rather than individuals. This can only occur, to quote the late German Green Party leader Petra Kelly, if ecological concerns are “tied to issues of economic justice—the exploitation of the poor by the rich.” Behind every environmental struggle of today there is a struggle over the expansion of the global treadmill—a case of landless workers or villagers who are compelled to destroy nature in order to survive, or of large corporations that seek to

expand profits with little concern for the natural and social devastation that they leave in their wake. Ecological development is possible, but only if the economic as well as environmental injustices associated with the treadmill are addressed. An ecological approach to the economy is about having enough, not having more. It must have as its first priority people, particularly poor people, rather than production or even the environment, stressing the importance of meeting basic needs and long-term security. This is the common morality with which we must combat the higher immorality of the treadmill. Above all we must recognize the old truth, long understood by the romantic and socialist critics of capitalism, that increasing production does not eliminate poverty.

Indeed, the global treadmill is so designed that the poor countries of the world often help finance the rich ones. During the period from 1982 to 1990, the Third World was a "net exporter of hard currency to the developed countries, on average \$30 billion per year." In this same period Third World debtors remitted to their creditors in the wealthy nations an average of almost \$12.5 billion per month in payments on debt alone. This is equal to what the entire Third World spends each month on health and education. It is this system of global inequity that reinforces both overpopulation (since poverty spurs population growth) and the kind of rapacious development associated with the destruction of tropical rain forests in the Third World.

For those with a pragmatic bent, much of what I have said here may seem too global and too abstract. The essential point that I want to leave you with, however, is the notion that although we are all on the treadmill, we do not all relate to it in the same way and with the same degree of commitment. I have found in my research into the ancient forest struggle in the Northwest—and others have discovered the same thing in other settings—that ordinary workers have strong envi-

ronmental values even though they may be at loggerheads with the environmental movement. In essence they are fighting for their lives and livelihoods at a fairly basic level.

We must find a way of putting people first in order to protect the environment. There are many ways of reducing the economic stakes in environmental destruction on the part of those who have little direct stake in the treadmill itself. But this means taking seriously issues of social and economic inequality as well as environmental destruction. Only by committing itself to what is now called "environmental justice" (combining environmental concerns and social justice) can the environmental movement avoid being cut off from those classes of individuals who are most resistant to the treadmill on social grounds. The alternative is to promote an environmental movement that is very successful in creating parks with Keep Out! signs, yet is complicit with the larger treadmill of production. By recognizing that it is not people (as individuals and in aggregate) that are enemies of the environment but the historically specific economic and social order in which we live, we can find sufficient common ground for a true moral revolution to save the earth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Foster believe that appealing generally to individual morality, or specifically to the ethics of business leaders, is an inadequate response to the global ecological crisis?
2. Why does Foster argue that environmental responses to the "treadmill of production" must be linked to issues of economic justice?
3. Reflecting on Foster's article, how might you be inspired to rethink the concept of "progress?"