Commentary by David Schwartzman on

"Energy and Growth: The Great Progressive Reversal"

by Michael Shellenberger & Ted Nordhaus.

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus hit some targets but badly miss others in this essay. It is unfortunate that they choose to attack the climate justice movement, albeit its weaknesses, instead of the real obstacle standing in the way of implementing an effective prevention program to avoid climate catastrophe, the Military Industrial Fossil Fuel Nuclear State Terror and Surveillance Complex, the “MIC”, at the core of 21st Century Capitalism.

The imperative need to eliminate energy poverty in the global South is the strongest point of their critique. More on this shortly.  By far the weakest is the authors’ uncritical support of fracked gas as a bridge to renewables because it allegedly prevents coal burning, ignoring the mounting evidence for significant methane leakage from fracked gas fields. They say “Burning coal saves trees but causes air pollution and global warming. Fracking for gas prevents coal burning but it can pollute the water. Nuclear energy produces not emissions but toxic waste and can result in major industrial accidents. Nevertheless, these are problems that must be dealt with through more modernization and progress, not less.”  In other words, let the genie out of the bottle and then try to control him! As Barry Commoner wisely advised the EPA forty years ago, pollution prevention is the best policy, not pollution control whether by “clean coal” or the other mirages like Gen III and IV nuclear power.

Yes, the issue of energy poverty is commonly ignored by the climate justice movement. But the authors claim“The challenge for the twenty-first century is thus to triple global energy demand, so that the world's poorest can enjoy modern living standards, while reducing our carbon emissions from energy production to zero.”Well, three times the present global consumption is equivalent to 3 x 18 = 54 trillion watts or 7.7 kilowatt/person for the present population of 7 billion people. Even in a 9 billion world this translates into 6 kilowatt/person or 1.7 times the rough minimum required for state of the science life expectancy (see graphs and papers posted at[www.solarUtopia.org](http://www.solarutopia.org/)). Several energy efficient countries/regions in the global North, such as Hong Kong and Japan consume near this minimum.  Thus, the analysis in this article fails to take into account the significant waste of energy by such countries as the United States**.** 

Much of the rest of this critique glosses over the real history of why such projects as big hydropower in the Amazon were opposed by both impacted indigenous people and their allies in the global North (noting too the evidence that carbon emissions from flooded forests resulting from big hydro is commonly comparable to burning coal). Cheap energy now comes at a huge cost to humans and the environment and the authors surely know this. So why don’t they explain the real option, wind/solar creation by transfer of subsidization from fossil fuels, especially those with the highest carbon footprint, and nuclear power ? Yes, this will entail a brutal struggle for big government change of policy. But isn’t that precisely what is high on the agenda of [350.org](http://350.org/), curbing the extraction and transportation of tar sands, and just recently fracked gas?

I strongly agree with the authors on their support for a critical role of government in a renewable transition, a point well made recently by Christian Parenti (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-parenti/carbon-divestment-_b_2213124.html>). And Christian Parenti is someone who surely can be labeled as a climate justice activist, illustrating the authors all too broad and inaccurate characterization in their critique.

Yes again, I agree with the authors,  large-scale creation of wind/solar energy infrastructure, built by the big corporate sector must begin under capitalism. Make this possible now, nationalize it later in an ecosocialist transition! Likewise, mini-grids connecting small scale wind and photovoltaics can linked up to a larger national, even international grid as solar transition progresses. Why then the put-down of mini-grids and bottom up solar, a development which is making solarization more and more attractive to the public?

Finally, they argue “If there is to be a solution to global warming, then it is as likely to come from the rising powers of the global East and South than the superannuated precincts of the West.”  Perhaps they are correct.   China is now leading the world in carbon emissions *and* building wind turbines and photovoltaics. But only class struggle informed by an ecosocialist perspective has the potential of making China the global vanguard in rapidly shutting down its coal-fired plants and building its wind/solar infrastructure. The fact that China now has a dominant role in developing Iraq’s large petroleum reserves has the potential to make this solar transition possible, using the fossil fuel with the lowest carbon footprint as the energy source.

The new threat of U.S.-instigated military intervention in Syria, regime change with the real target being  Iran, is part of the ongoing Imperial Project to control the world’s remaining reserves of petroleum. The larger context is humanity's challenge to prevent climate catastrophe. Only curbing  imperial power can create a cooperative global regime facilitating rapid decarbonation of energy, starting with rapid phaseout of the highest carbon footprint fuels (coal, tar sands, fracked gas, oil shale), coupled with its replacement with wind/solar has a chance to prevent this catastrophe. And only conventional petroleum (Venezuela, Iraq, Iran etc.), the fossil fuel with the lowest carbon footprint, can still make this transition possible (for more details see [www.solarUtopia.org](http://www.solarutopia.org/)). Keeping **this** oil in the ground will condemn most of humanity living in the global South to more misery driven by energy poverty.  Internal class struggle will determine whether  BRIC, with China at the forefront, will lead this transition. We should be grateful that Russia and China now stand in the way, blocking imperial regime change. Our task is obvious.

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