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## THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

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### **I. WHAT NEXT FOR THE WORLD?**

All empires fall, yet they do not do so by accident. Complex systems, be they rainforests or global capitalism, prosper precisely because they are adapted to the circumstances of the world around them, and the systems themselves shape the environment within which they prosper. Tropical rainforests, in part, create the rainfall that maintains them as rainforests. Capitalism expands when buying and selling occurs: as ever more products, processes and people are measured on the same single monetary scale, they become commodities, and capitalism creates the wider enclosures necessary for its continued existence.

Any complex system, whether capitalism or rainforests, has a few basic organisational principles that keep the system operating. When the environment changes, these complex systems must adapt to survive. In the rainforest, over a run of dry years, more drought-tolerant trees would be winners, less drought-tolerant trees losers, but the forest would remain a forest. Neoliberal capitalism destroyed the 'job-for-life', industrial employment of the late 20th century and is replacing it with short-term, contract jobs. Is this a victory *for* people who rejected industrial employment and attempted to live differently, or a victory *against* labour struggles for a 'just' and social wage? In a fundamental sense it doesn't matter: the accumulation of capital continues, the inhumanity of selling our own lives remains, capitalism survives. However, if the basic

assumptions that keep the system operating are rendered obsolete by social or physical environmental changes, the system faces a crisis and may collapse.

The key feature of complex systems is that when their elasticity is stretched to breaking point, unlike in 'normal' times, small changes can have large and long-lasting effects. Yet, which changes will have such impacts cannot be precisely stated: any looming collapse can itself only be predicted in broad terms. Furthermore, if a system collapses, there is no way of knowing in advance what any new system (or systems) that replaced it would look like. The final feature is that such a change is fundamental – there is no going back.

In rainforests, a run of dry years may occur such that, at a certain point, no trees survive: trees will be wholly replaced by bushes or grasses – a fundamentally different system. Even if wet years returned, the lack of seeds and the lack of animals and other systems that disperse them would mean that a return to the previous forest is impossible. In Europe, the transition from feudalism to the capitalist mode of production was one such moment of crisis, which led to irreversible transformation.

Today, we are at another historical moment of crisis, a fork or turning point where anything can happen. Capitalism assumes that the supply of resources which can be converted into capital is infinite. To these ends, capitalism consumes the resources of the world in its never-ending search for greater cycles of production and consumption. But in direct contradiction to this most basic premise of capitalism, our planet is no more than a small spheroid and its resources are finite. A key organisational principle of capitalism – its expansion – is being breached on multiple fronts. This is a problem with no solution and obvious symptoms are present: climate change and the irrevocable decline of oil, to name but two. Collapse and transformation are around the corner.

Broadly, two sets of arguments attempt to counter any claim to the demise of capitalism on ecological grounds. The first concerns the capitalist system itself, while the second is about resistance to capitalism's inhumanity. Economists argue that there is such a thing as 'resource substitutability': as one resource begins to run out, it becomes more expensive, giving an incentive to find either more of it or, ultimately, to find another resource that will do the job. In one example of resource substitutability, synthetic medical drug production now counters the difficulties in harvesting increasingly rare wild plants and animals. However, not everything is readily substitutable.

Oil has been the fuel of capitalism for a century and it cannot last forever. Whoever has control of oil has power and wealth. If someone could find or invent an alternative to oil, untold wealth and power would flow their way. This incentive has been around for a century. Nothing has turned up. When important environmental problems are identified, such as carbon emissions and climate change, the usual answer is to fix the problem through technology: an increased role for nuclear power, for example. Yet the estimated amount of uranium required



to switch today's global energy use to nuclear power is far more than all the known and predicted deposits of uranium across the Earth's surface. The use of uranium in nuclear weapons means its whereabouts have been fairly extensively mapped, although figures are subject to the same secrecy and volume-inflation as oil reserve figures.

More worryingly, there is no substitute possible for the chemical elements required for high-yield crop production, some of which are fast running out (notably phosphorus). More broadly, where are the substitutes for land and water, the demand for which will always expand with economic expansion? The so-called 'knowledge economy' is not free from these two precious resources: it takes 71 litres of freshwater to produce a single 2-gram, low-specification computer chip. Or more than 20 million litres daily for a single chip factory. The environmental impact of replacing a computer every two years (their current average lifespan) is roughly equivalent to that of replacing a new car every ten years.

The second set of arguments countering claims of capitalism's inevitable demise on ecological grounds revolve around the purported 'failure' of previous social change movements. The analysis of capitalism by the Left is that, given enough time, capitalism would plunge the majority of the world into such misery that people would revolt, precipitating a revolution that would cause the emergence of another social system based on more humane principles. So far, capitalism has managed to avert this crisis through dividing people along lines of

privilege, 'race', nation, gender, and so on *ad infinitum*, through control and manipulation of information through the mass media, through minor modifications to the system and through the use of extreme violence.

Capitalism's strategists believe they can use similar techniques to avert problems caused by our planet's environmental limits being breached. One good example of this is the attempt to create a market in carbon emissions, which actually seeks to make money out of climate change through enclosing or privatising the atmospheric commons. This tactic has been coupled with the manipulation of information about the threat of climate change. But there are major differences between human beings and carbon dioxide molecules. Humans may resist or rebel, and they may be pacified with threatened or actual job losses, starvation, torture or prison. But a carbon dioxide molecule is immune to such attempts at control. Nothing that is said, written or done will change the amount of energy (heat) it reflects back to Earth, so further warming up the planet. Journalists can report what they like, but the temperature will still rise. An anthropocentric world-view, as is common on the Left, leads to looking at the environment as one of many similar problems created by capitalism, rather than understanding the intrinsic differences. Capitalism is immensely resilient, but it cannot, like some latter-day god, alter the physical limits of the planet.

We are not considering some grim future. The crisis is already present today, although few connect the disparate dots. The Red Cross charity already estimates that there are more environmental refugees than those displaced by war. Resource wars (the occupation of Iraq and fighting in the Congo), land and freshwater scarcity (in part fuelling the war around Darfur in Sudan), climate change-induced hurricanes (Katrina and 20 others) and other natural disasters on varying scales (the East Asian Tsunami, the 2003 European heatwave causing 30,000 deaths), new infectious diseases (Sars, 'bird flu' and Ebola) all mean the social fabric of the world is being stretched towards, and beyond, its limits. Moreover, most of the world's population is highly dependent upon the infrastructure of global capitalism. When the food does not arrive at the supermarket, truly dangerous times begin.

Ecological collapse is spelling the end of the world as we know it. This currently slow and chronic collapse is caused by global capitalism, as its search for infinite resources to fuel its infinite pursuit of profit is coming up against the finite bounds of the environment, causing nearly irreparable damage to global life-support systems in the process. The finite amount of world resources directly contradicts a founding principle of global capitalism.

## II. WHAT NEXT FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS?

The very danger of our situation gives us hope that fundamental social change is possible. When systems are relatively well-adapted to their environment, fundamental change is nearly impossible. But in times of crisis, when the social and

physical environment is changing rapidly, the system itself teeters and it is immensely susceptible to change: indeed, revolutionary transformation may be the only way to survive. However, in desperation to retain the certainties of the current system, strange adaptations of previous social forms once thought long-dead can re-appear, such as authoritarianism and medieval religious fundamentalism, as exemplified by the rise of the neoconservatives in the USA and political Islam in the Middle East. These signals indicate the potential scale of changes on the horizon.

The fundamental point for those who want a much more humane future, is that it is necessary to incorporate an understanding of the imminence of ecological collapse, and how to halt it, into our analyses of the world. Our very survival is not guaranteed. We simply do not have time for endless sectarian debates over ideology. Nor do we have the luxury of patiently waiting for the 'correct moment' to strike.

Belief in the old two-step strategy for social change, to take state power and then transform the world, is through bitter experience no longer widely held. The ideological Party that patiently waits for either the next election or the correct conditions for 'armed struggle' has evaporated. And the (male) First-World industrial worker has lost his privileged position as the only (perceived) agent of change. A different form of struggle has emerged in many places across the world. The emphasis is on creating our own worlds, not on seeking state power. We demand nothing from the state, but instead prefer to 'do our own thing'. We excavate capital's power by exercising our own power here and now. This is attractive, in part, because many no longer see the world and its workings as a linear machine, to be confronted on these terms, with ever larger political parties, or more unity within the working class, or more people becoming activists. Instead many see the world as inherently non-linear, and best confronted by expanding on multiple fronts (as capitalism does), yet with different social relations. This form of politics leads to a rejection of the centralised Party as an organisational form, and has meant instead the revival of the affinity group, the council and the assembly. We have seen all these forms reemerge over the past decade or so, and both affinity groups and assemblies were utilised productively over the period of the Gleneagles counter-mobilisation.

Affinity groups, councils and assemblies relate to each other in networks. Networks provide the space for people to develop connections between each other. Instead of homogenising its participants into an obedient mass, a network preserves and facilitates self-organisation by maximising the flow of information and potential connections between its members. While a hierarchy takes power away from individuals to a distant leader, a network respects the concerns of every participant, keeping consensual decisions to a minimum. Hierarchies tend to demand that everyone adopts the same worldview. Networks thrive on a diversity of viewpoints that may never agree, and merely provide the means for the



many voices of their participants to communicate, allowing people with differing beliefs to change and to discover common ground, while preserving their own unique perspective.

Networks are primarily for communication between relatively autonomous groups, and have been strengthened immensely by the proliferation of information technology such as the web, email and mobile phones, giving groups quick reaction times and the ability to coordinate globally. On the streets these networks encourage a diversity of tactics and thrive off swarming and creativity.

Dissent! is a good example of such a network. The focus on local groups, mostly having a physical presence in social centres, meant that the counter-mobilisation against the G8 was grounded in the unique conditions of every group in Britain. The continual growth of these social centres will provide the physical points of contact and information for a sustainable way of life beyond capitalism. The network had distinctly minimal foundation that comprised just five 'hallmarks' from Peoples' Global Action. This potentially allowed people from a wide diversity of backgrounds to weave together multiple ecological and social struggles into a generalised movement against their root cause: capitalism itself.

In action, the network tied local struggles against the M74 motorway in Glasgow to global struggles against climate change through the 'Boogie on the Bridge' street party and demonstrated alternatives to unlimited growth in the form of the Cre8 Summat community garden. Struggles in Edinburgh against 'precarity'

were connected to the universal need of humans for dignity and joy through the Carnival for Full Enjoyment, while the Indymedia Centre provided a dense communications network, broadcasting these examples of both resistance and alternatives across the world. As the G8 summit itself approached, the Dissent! network provided the infrastructure to demonstrate alternatives in action on a large scale: low-impact living in the Stirling eco-village and the decentralised road and rail blockades which shut the summit down on its opening morning, all organised on the basis of consensus.

Dissent! understood capitalism as an entire social system to be confronted and transformed and, in response, developed a mix of living and demonstrating alternatives, taking direct action against both the symbols and practical institutions of capitalism, while keeping the environment, broadly termed, centre stage.

This is not to say that the Dissent! network and anti-G8 mobilisation did not both have numerous problems – they did. Here we are concerned with making some general points. While we broadly agree with the approach of building other worlds, living life despite capitalism, there is a central issue that troubles us. How do we build a new world upon the blasted ruins of the current one? And how do we do so on the urgent time-scale forced upon us by the massive ecological crisis facing humanity? In short, you can't have a revolution on a dead planet.

The lack of interest in taking power means conflict is down-graded. It no longer occupies centre-stage in revolutionary politics, as it previously has done for many from both Marxist and anarchist backgrounds. Of course, by attempting to take what we need to 'build a world in which many worlds are possible' – land, buildings and the like – we are brought back into conflict, but it is a reluctant conflict. This is epitomised by the Zapatista Army, an army constantly questioning the use of armed conflict, and more interested in community assemblies and poetry than 'armed struggle'.

Our fear is that in wealthy areas of the world where we are well plugged into the infrastructure of global capitalism, it is certainly possible to have cosy, parallel 'alternative worlds', which pose no real threat to capitalist social relations. The legalised squatting scene in parts of continental Europe or New Age 'drop-out' culture across the world are busy perfecting non-hierarchical meeting skills while the planet burns. It is entirely possible that the social centres and Dissent! generally could follow this pattern. Such contradictions between not contesting power, yet confronting governments and corporations to secure what any future society will need – a stable climate, freshwater, clean air, unpolluted and undeveloped land – need to be made explicit.

So what's the plan? As there is no certainty in these immensely unstable times, there can be no master strategy. However, some tactics obviously appear to make more sense than others. Broadly speaking, we need to be action-focused to gain and defend the resources that humanity and life in general need. We must keep a focus on protecting our life support systems for the future. To do this,

we need lots and lots of people to be involved, and so our actions need to resonate with people who are more and more diverse – people who are, apparently, different from ourselves! – allowing them to fuse with networks of resistance. This can only happen if we ground our actions in the concrete reality of people’s lives, not any abstract belief system cooked up in revolutionary journals or universities. Taking action that builds a foundation for further action is a major incentive for people’s involvement.

Let’s be honest: our ability to avert ecological collapse and the deaths of millions of people is, at present, minimal. Yet we live in extraordinary times: a historical turning point where anything can happen. As shown by Indymedia and the internet in general, ideas and information can today spread with unprecedented speed, and news of social unrest in one place often inspires revolts in a thousand others. As the system shifts further and further into collapse, we have a fighting chance of surviving capitalism and healing the ecological crisis.

We write from the UK, so what about something specific? We know that the coming together of different elements can bring about a socially explosive crisis. How about an all-out campaign to stop the new nuclear power stations we are told are needed to meet the shortfall in the UK’s energy needs? There is the potential to halt a hugely destructive ‘development project’ – one which would leave a damaging legacy for thousands of years – to critique the entire system and to bring talk of alternatives centre-stage, while piling the pressure on the government. Electricity blackouts would focus everyone’s minds. Mutual aid and solidarity between local communities, anti-war, anti-roads, anti-capitalist and climate change groups, could transform us, all those groups, the Dissent! network, and the UK as a whole.

### **III. WHAT NEXT FOR ME?**

We have presented a terrifying spectre of collapse, but also of hope. Yet the hope rests with us. As individuals, we often feel dwarfed by powers seemingly beyond our control. But let us not forget that it is ordinary people who fuel this system, both figuratively when we go to work every day and literally when we pump our car full of petrol. It is people like you and me who built the pyramids and the skyscrapers. Despite the immense power accorded by the media to the G8 and other so-called ‘leaders’, it is people like you and me who have the power to transform the world.

To survive this turmoil and thrive, we will need to look after ourselves. We will need resilient social networks of friends and political allies: the wider and deeper they are, the better we will fare. We will need to take and defend the resources we need for any future society: water, buildings, land. We will need to be smart, understanding how the current world (dys)functions, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Importantly, our ideas – how to live the world differently – need to be well-known, easy to take on board, easy to join in with, and open to



be adapted. We will need changes at every scale, from the tiny, individual 'everyday' things, up to more intermittent, massive surges of collective energy.

The essence of action is to get involved now to change the immediate social and physical environment around you to reflect the world you want to live in. This can sometimes be difficult and daunting at first, but it is possible, and it leads to a more enjoyable life in the here and now. There are things we can do as individuals: instead of shopping at a supermarket, try instead to purchase locally-grown food from small farmers near you, or even grow your own food in an allotment. Most importantly, find other people. No one can change the world by themselves. There are almost certainly like-minded people nearby who want to live in a better world. Search the web, talk to people in pubs, find like-minded groups that make you feel less lonely and isolated. Find different groups whose viewpoints may expand your own. There may be an anti-capitalist social centre near you that doubtless needs your help. If you live in the UK there might be a local group that participates in Dissent! If there isn't one, there are always local community centres, or why not start your own group with friends and plug into wider networks across the world?

Remaining open and transparent – building groups and networks on the solid basis of trust is critical. This is frequently difficult. Most people will be there for the long-haul: genuinely committed to changing the world around them into a freer and more humane place. However, a few will be there solely to develop their careers, one or two might be spies for the police; some will have personal grudges, others you may just find hard to work with. Assemblies and the ubiquitous email lists will sometimes be chaotic and seemingly far from being 'another world'. But resist the temptation to say 'fuck it': you *must* deal with all of this in order to keep on expanding and deepening these networks of struggles and experiments in living. A further obstacle is the tendency to label. Calling ourselves or our groups 'activists' or 'anarchists', for example, both limits our potential and excludes others, making change much more difficult. Remember, this is deadly serious – nothing less than the fate of the world is in your hands. Your viewpoint on life is unique and your perspective and imagination is needed by the world. In concert with others, your action or inaction can determine the future of life on this planet. In times like these, the smallest of actions can have global effects.

Other worlds are certainly possible. No social system has lasted forever, and this empire too will fall. But these other worlds are going to exist as part of this physical world, which we must fight for. It will take all the strength and creativity of the multitudes of people underneath the heel of capitalism to formulate the strategies and tactics to fight the current system and so create the space for sustainable alternatives to flourish. To escape the intrinsic depravity of capitalism and its so-called leaders like the G8, we must shut them down, anywhere and everywhere. While simultaneously, amongst the ruins of this world, our networks are already sending up the tender shoots of better futures.