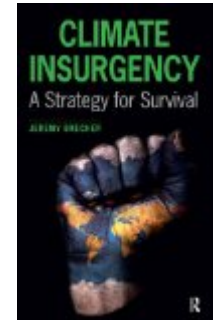


**Jeremy Brecher.** *Climate Insurgency: A Strategy for Survival*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2015. 170 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61205-821-4.



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Back in the 1980s, during the Ronald Reagan presidency, I first read Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) in which he forewarned of the horrors of a nuclear holocaust. I became somewhat obsessed with the subject and talked about it with everyone I met. I was speaking about it to a stranger at a party one night and was bowled over by his reaction. He told me that his own death was of the same tragic importance to him as the extinction of the entire human race. I came away from that conversation stunned that a person could have such little concern for the rest of his fellow humans. I remember hoping only that Reagan, whose finger was on the button, did not hold the same view. It does not bode well for the human species if its individual members can have such little empathy for the survival of the species as a whole. It indicates a profound alienation from the universal, from what Karl Marx referred to as our species being. This extreme disaffection is possible in a society governed by capital and the social relations it engenders. Dealing with our current ecological crises means dealing also with

the social relations and culture that separates individuals from each other, from their natural environment, and from their species.

The astrobiologist Robert Hazen once pointed out that the human-wrought changes to the climate and biosphere do not threaten the Earth per se—the planet will survive and continue no matter what—but there is no question that increased global warming poses a grave threat to the continuation of advanced human society. As James Hansen, the director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, has put it, “continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself.”[1] Only the prospect of a nuclear holocaust has presented the world with such dire peril to human survival. Business as usual, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, will lead to an increase in the average global temperature of 1.5 to 6 degrees Celsius over preindustrial levels within this century. The consequences of the resulting ecological catastrophe forces every human to con-

front an existential imperative—to prevent this increase from happening. This should become the moral duty of every one of us. To fail is to subject our species and all our succeeding generations to undeniable hardship and suffering as the effects of climate change and the resulting rise of the sea level, elimination of species, desertification, and severity of storms make complex civilization impossible and endanger all human life. Yet despite the undeniable scientific evidence of human-caused climate change, its devastating effects, and the common interest of all the worlds' inhabitants to safeguard the climate, very little in the way of solutions has even been proposed, never mind acted upon. The movements for climate protection that have arisen have spent most of their energy in confronting massive denial and intractable governments and institutions. While little has been accomplished, the atmosphere continues to become more charged with carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, the Earth's temperature continues to rise, and tipping points are approached that will make fixing the problem ever more difficult and soon impossible.

In *Climate Insurgency: A Strategy for Survival*, Jeremy Brecher, a lifelong activist and labor historian, has written a blueprint and plan for the climate protection movement to combat global warming. He centers his proposal on the idea of the public trust doctrine in which governments are held responsible for the well-being and care of their citizens. Under this principle, which has some history in American law, the state serves as trustee for the interests of its citizens and protector of the commons, in this case the atmosphere and water needed to support life. Brecher sees this principle as forming a basis for what he calls a "Global Nonviolent Constitutional Insurgency" in which civil disobedience or civil resistance is used to force governments and institutions to take the necessary actions to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases to levels necessary for continued human society of any complexity.

Brecher has been involved in efforts to protect the climate for decades now and has witnessed the failure of these efforts many times. He therefore begins his book with a review of the history of climate action, the little it has accomplished, and the reason why he feels it has not been more successful. The reason he gives, somewhat obviously, is that the "measures we need to protect the global ecosphere threaten the power of the world's most powerful institutions" (p. 59). He goes on to list the institutions that create the greatest hurdles to climate protection: the fossil fuel industry and its supporters, neoliberalism belief systems, and the nation-state. To these are added the obstacles to such a movement that exist in people's minds and in the culture, such as denial and incrementalism (the idea that small steps are enough), the fear of economic collapse due to climate control measures, individualism, fear of social movements, and hopelessness.

As for institutions, the fossil fuel industry is beyond doubt the chief opponent of climate protection, and the industry's profits are a major contributor to the overall profitability of the capitalist economy. As Brecher points out, fossil fuel corporations use their essential position in the world's economy to wield tremendous political power, and they are supported by people and institutions that believe their interests to be tied to those of the fossil fuel industry. Hansen, a leading scientific voice for climate protection, wrote in 2008, "Our home planet is dangerously near a tipping point at which human-made greenhouse gases reach a level where major climate changes can proceed mostly on their own momentum.... The implications are profound, and the only resolution is for humans to move to a fundamentally different energy pathway within a decade. Otherwise it will be too late for one-third of the world's animals and plant species and millions of the most vulnerable members of our own species."<sup>2</sup> With three years remaining in that decade, the

fossil fuel industry is nowhere near relinquishing its hold on the world's energy needs.

Neoliberalism is another obstacle Brecher cites. He defines it as an "ideology that argues that market forces should determine human decisions and that governments and other public institutions should act only to support private profit-making" (p. 62). It is this ideology, he argues, that opposes government policy or the use of government money for any purpose except to support profit making.

Then there are sovereign nation-states that look only to their own interests and are in competition with all other nations. This ideology of national self-interest and nominal independence presents a major obstacle to climate protection by granting individual nations the legal right to engage in practically any activity within their own boundaries no matter how detrimental to the world at large or to their own citizens, as for example burning fossil fuels excessively or polluting their own air and water. This doctrine, Brecher points out, which is "embodied in the practice of states and the structure of the United Nations, has allowed nations to lay waste to the atmosphere and the common future of humanity" (p. 63). He makes the convincing argument that the necessary measures to protect the climate are blocked by "the way we organize our life on earth-by our world order" and that this world order must be transformed in order to proceed with effective action for climate protection (p. 127). He admits this is a big order for the climate movement but insists that a world order, unlike the political order of individual nations, is easier to change and gives as examples the Cold War world order that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the Keynesian economic arrangements of the mid-twentieth century. He feels that not only are world orders more fluid than national orders but that unlike the constitutional form of government with elected officials and legal systems, "the world

order has not the slightest claim to legitimacy" (p. 78).

The idea of legitimacy is an important one for Brecher. The climate protection movement, while able to make strong moral arguments for acting to combat global warming, "has had a harder time finding a legal frame to ... legitimate its actions" (p. 78). He cites the public trust doctrine as the primary means of providing this legal framework for the climate insurgency he envisions. The movement will draw its authority from this doctrine, claiming that the nations of the world have failed to live up to their obligation to protect the common inheritance of their citizens and that therefore the people have the right to take whatever actions are necessary to force climate protection measures on them. Preferably these actions will be of a nonviolent nature modeled on past nonviolent movements for social change, using massive civil disobedience and resistance to gain the needed transformations necessary to protect the climate.

What are the measures Brecher feels are needed? Essentially, he sees the solution to global warming as a series of reforms that would reallocate the society's resources to green economic measures: "putting a price on carbon ... through taxation, fees, cap-and-trade systems, local initiatives ... to produce renewable energy and reduce energy consumption" and to develop government programs to plan, mobilize, reinvest and intervene in economic decision making (p. 92). Like Al Gore, Paul Gliding, and others, he draws on the government-led mobilization of World War II as a model for what would be needed. He formulates all his proposed measures in terms of the monetary costs associated with them, calling for a climate protection fund to mobilize the two hundred million unemployed workers in the world to work on carbon reduction and alternative energy projects. He estimates a .7 trillion dollar annual cost that would be funded by a carbon tax, climate bonds, and damages extracted from corpo-

rations responsible for greenhouse gas pollution (p. 103).

Carbon tax proposals such as that suggested by the economist William Nordhaus fall far short of what would be needed to reduce carbon emissions to a safe level and are based not on ideas of what is necessary for the good of humanity but on what is deemed safe for the future profitability of the capitalist economy. Cap and trade, which are government-backed markets in carbon offsets, have failed whenever they have been used. Carbon markets have also failed to have an impact on carbon emissions, “allowing nations to buy out of the actual reductions in various ways” (p. 1). The profitability of any proposal remains the bottom line for all strategies for curtailing greenhouse gas emissions within the capitalist market economy.

Despite Brecher’s often-stated need to transform the world order, he seems not to acknowledge how much of that world order is a product of a social organization dictated by the needs of capital. Neoliberalism was not a policy instituted because greedy capitalists wanted to replace the Keynesian world order with a more lucrative model but one that was adopted to meet the need for capital accumulation at a time when the post-war expansion had run its course. The nation-state system is likewise an essential feature of the capitalist order serving as a social control mechanism that equates the interests of the nation’s working population with those of the national capitalist class by using patriotic rhetoric to pit the workers of different nations against each other while defending their own ruling class. It also organizes the postcolonial world into a hierarchical system in which the dominant capitalist nations exploit the labor and natural resources of the less-developed countries.

It is an illusion to think that climate change can be effectively addressed by reforming the capitalist economy without altering its essential feature, the self-expansion of capital and its vital need for continued growth. As the authors write

in *The Ecological Rift*, “what is clear is that the long-term strategy for ecological revolution throughout the globe involves the building of a society of substantive equality—the struggle for socialism.... There can be no true ecological revolution that is not socialist: no true socialist revolution that is not ecological. This means recapturing Marx’s own vision of socialism/communism, which he defined as a society where ‘the associated producers govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control.’”[3]

Brecher is to be commended for trying to devise a strategy to deal with what is perhaps the most pressing problem that has faced the human race at a time when little else is being suggested. He appeals to reviewers to examine the strategy critically, “but [he] also hope[s] they will either correct its flaws or develop a better alternative. Climate protection can’t wait for a perfect strategy; all of us have a duty to find the best strategy we can and then act on it” (p. 8). The problem is that global warming, as he is quick to point out, is very much interwoven with the dynamics of the capitalist social system that we all live under and with the social networks and institutions that support and thrive within it. A real and effective insurgency capable of challenging the power of capital will be ruthlessly attacked by that power so that the conditions under which the insurgent strategy was planned will change and new strategies that take account of these changing conditions will become necessary. What those conditions will be cannot be foreseen but recognition of the necessity to abolish capitalist social relations will be the sine qua non of any strategy to bring about true protection of the Earth’s climate. To refuse to acknowledge this necessity is itself another form of denialism.

This being said, one can only agree with Brecher that this crisis is of such a magnitude that anything that can function to forestall or even slow continued global warming should not be

counted out. Paul Gilding in his book *The Great Disruption: How the Climate Crisis Will Change Everything (for the Better)* (2011) makes the point that the time will come when the effects of human-caused climate change will overwhelm all denial and complacency. Then the demand to fix the problem will assert itself and roll over all opposition. Gilding sees this as a great awakening, the turning point when universal recognition will fuel the political will to do whatever it takes to solve the problem. Hopefully the awakening will come soon enough to save future generations from catastrophe and will include the realization that the destruction of the human environment is intimately entwined with social relations within capitalism. If humanity can realize the species unity we all share, we can use the greatest of all human powers, our power of social organization, to build a world of equality, sustainability, and justice with a healthy climate for our own and all other species.

#### Notes

[1]. James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), ix.

[2]. James Hansen, "Tipping Point: Perspective of a Climatologist," in *State of the Wild 2008-2009: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands, and Oceans*, ed. Eva Fearn (Washington: Island Press, 2008), 7-8.

[3]. John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 429.

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