

note This paper was first written as a presentation to a Green Red Alliance conference in London in 1991. It was subsequently published in Z Magazine in the United States, in September, 1991. This is copyright material. Please do not copy or reproduce without the permission of the author.

What is a Green Red Economics?

The Future of Work

When you mix green and red together, what you get is a sort of sludgy brown colour - not to shirk indelicacy - the colour of shit. This coincidence - if coincidence it is - is not an embarrassment to be avoided but a welcome gift of synchronicity. Because if there is one issue which most neatly encapsulates the contradictions and dilemmas of trying to synthesise the green aims of care for the planet and renewability of energy with the socialist aims of ensuring an equitable division of labour it is this: what do you do with the shit?

Let us take the example of the disposable nappy - surely the greatest misnomer ever. It is, of course, anything but disposable - one of the nastiest and most indestructible forms of litter of our time. Nowadays we encounter them everywhere, dragged out of dustbins on inner city housing estates by roaming Alsatian dogs, piled up around rubbish bins in parks and roadside lay-bys, washed up by the tide on beaches. The most usual way to get rid of these things is to stuff them, shit and all, into a plastic carrier bag which eventually ends up - if you are lucky - in a landfill rubbish site where the shit, wrapped impermeably in plastic, does not so much biodegrade as ferment, producing a cloud of methane gas which eventually bursts the bag and is released into the environment to add its twopennorth to the hole in the ozone layer.

So, what should a green socialist policy on disposable nappies be? Many Greens, I suspect, would favour outlawing them altogether, and returning to the 'traditional' method of dealing with baby shit - reusable cloth nappies. But this raises the question of how they are to be washed, and by whom. Tens of thousands of electric washing machines and tumble dryers, each in a separate individual household, using biologically harmful detergents is surely just as environmentally destructive, in terms of energy consumption and water pollution, even if we discount the environmental damage generated by the process of producing the washing machines, the tumble dryers, the detergents and fabric softeners and all the other paraphernalia of commodified washing. If we regress further - as some would advocate - we end up with washing as a labour-intensive service industry, carried out for the rich by domestic servants, for the employed urban working classes by industrial laundries, and for country-dwellers and the urban unemployed by the slow, back-breaking unpaid labour of women. Because of the division of labour it embodies, this solution would present serious difficulties to many socialists and most feminists.

There are, of course, other possible solutions. In parts of China, traditionally, while babies are still exclusively breast-fed, their shit is fed to dogs. When they are older, as with adults, it is used as manure for crop-growing. This is accompanied by practices of very early toilet-training, which involve high levels of vigilance and intensive work for the child's carers - women, of course - and may be regarded as psychologically unacceptable by many in the West. So, ecological soundness is here - as so often seems to be the case - linked with a domestic division of labour which is repressive to women and arguably also to children.

An alternative to the 'no-technology' approach is that of 'appropriate technology'. Here, one can imagine the possibility of disposable nappies made from some locally-grown biodegradable substance which, when used, is fed, along with the shit, into a machine which converts it into a usable form of energy: fuel, for instance, or fertiliser. The trouble with this approach, as with so many other technological fixes is that, in order to function effectively, such a solution would require a high degree of social coercion and centralised planning - anathema to some of the libertarian strands in green thinking.

I do not wish to get too sidetracked into the technicalities of this particular issue. Rather, to illustrate the fact that, in order to devise an acceptable solution it is necessary to address a number of overlapping questions which seem to me to be fundamental to the more general problem of how to integrate green goals with red ones:

- should the labour involved be paid or unpaid?
- should it be done privately, by individuals, or collectively - socially?
- should it be carried out by specialists or shared equally throughout the population?
- should it be carried out in capital-intensive or labour-intensive ways?
- should it be commodified (based on manufacturing industries) or service-based?
- to what extent should traditional divisions of labour (gender-based, skill-based, geographically-based) be challenged in our search for solutions? In other words, how do we balance respect for tradition with the impulse for liberation?
- what measures can we use to weigh the relative values of job satisfaction, autonomy, efficiency, time-saving and environmental kindness? Must there always be a tension between the saving or expenditure of human energy and the saving or expenditure of physical energy?

I do not pretend to have answers to all of these questions. Before even attempting to do so, it seems to me to be necessary to clear away some of the myths which have impeded creative thinking on the subject in the past. So, the task I have set myself here is simply to identify a few of these myths.

'Growth' - the false dichotomy

One of these myths is the notion that the main issue dividing greens from reds is 'growth'. Socialists, it is held, are in favour of growth, while the environmental movement is against it. This begs the question of what growth actually is and how it is measured. Investigating this question, we find that in most definitions it is simply a measure of the activities carried out in the money economy. In other words, it is an indication of the quantity of socialised labour, both constructive and destructive, in a given society. An expansion, or contraction, of unpaid labour - regardless of the good or harm which this unpaid labour may be doing to the environment, or the extent to which it is contributing to the satisfaction of human needs - is not measured at all by it. Thus if a political decision is taken, for instance, to socialise some new area of previously unpaid labour, such as childcare, home nursing or cooking, and transform it into paid labour, this will appear, statistically as 'growth'. Similarly, the return of previously paid activities to the unpaid status of housework (as some environmentalists advocate) will appear as the diminution of growth. This, despite the fact that it is likely to be more energy-intensive and wasteful for the same activities to be replicated in thousands of different homes than to take advantage of the economies of scale which can be achieved by socialising them.

It is difficult to imagine a policy for the liberation of women, or for the improvement of health and living standards in many third world countries which does not involve increasing socialisation of many of the tasks which are currently carried out without pay. And this socialisation would inevitably lead to enormous growth in the amount of activity taking place in the money economy. However this 'growth' cannot be automatically equated with increasing consumption of energy or non-renewable natural sources. The issue of energy-consumption has to be treated quite separately from that of economic growth, at least as currently defined.

The 'robot society' myth

A common thread in much of the literature about the future of work, from both green and red perspectives, is the notion that technological development, particularly the development of computer-controlled production technology and other applications of artificial intelligence, is already leading or will in the future lead to permanent mass unemployment. It is sometimes further argued that this development will bring capitalism to its knees, although the exact means by which this will be achieved is disputed: by making the extraction of surplus value impossible; by creating an impoverished lumpen mass of workers who will spontaneously erupt into revolutionary activity; or simply by destroying the consumer base for the products of the new automated factories. The argument that 'robots don't buy cars' is not new. Indeed, it has surfaced in some form or other each time since the industrial revolution that a new production technology has been introduced. However, each time, history has proved it wrong. The dynamics of capitalism are such that it has a seemingly infinite capacity for the generation of new commodities each of which, at least in the early stages of its production, will require a manufacturing workforce and each of which will also generate new service activities for its development, management and distribution. To stay with the car industry, we can see that its initial introduction put a lot of people out of work whose jobs were concerned with looking after horses, making carriages and so on. However its introduction didn't just create manufacturing jobs making and assembling components; it also created new 'needs' which became the basis of new industries: oil extraction; petrol dispensing; road-building; parking attendance; traffic policing; windscreen washing and so on. As they have become automated, some of these have, in turn, generated new commodities which in turn have to be manufactured and serviced: the oil rig; the automatic petrol pump, the parking meter; the road sign; the child safety seat; the nodding dog and so on. A similar tale could be told of any other product. Any forecast of the future of work, and any strategy devised to deal with it, must therefore take account of this dynamic. Either a decision has to be taken to halt it: to introduce no new products or services and simply live with the deficiencies of those we have. Or an attempt must be made to predict its progress and find some way of working with its grain, to develop its more positive features and minimise the harmful ones.

The first of these options would effectively involve 'freezing' many of the worst features of the present - the divisions between 'haves' and 'have-nots', the environmentally destructive, energy-hungry and hazardous nature of products and processes, and the exploitative division of labour which their use currently entails. Because existing social relations are actually designed in to many of the machines currently in use, a decision not to develop these machines any further is effectively a decision to accept the continuance of these social relations. The second option has the advantage of allowing for greater possibilities for change. However it is important to disabuse ourselves of the idea that such change could ever include the possibility of effectively eliminating work for the majority of the population. This carrot - the complementary, not to say compensatory, other (daydream) side of the mass unemployment nightmare - is, it seems to me, a dangerous delusion which has in the past played a powerful role in discouraging workers' resistance to technological change. The socialist dream of a dignified, leisured future with no more coal to dig and no more floors to scrub is immensely seductive to anyone exhausted by manual labour, and, although it has always existed in tension with an alternative Morrisite vision of the joy of unalienated creative labour, has become

inextricably linked in the public imagination with the idea of scientific and technological progress. It is a necessary task, it seems to me, to disentangle this connection. There is no empirical basis for arguing that the need for nasty work to be done is going to wither away, and the difficult questions about what is an equitable division of labour cannot be so easily ducked.

The 'electronic cottage' myth

Another myth which has surfaced in the wake of the introduction of information technology is that of the electronic cottage. Extrapolating wildly from statistics on the growth of 'information processing' activities, proponents of this view suggest that by the end of this century a majority of the population could be 'telecommuting' from their homes, communicating by means of computers linked through telecommunications networks to their employers. This development, it is argued, will reduce energy consumption (by avoiding all that commuting), make cities redundant (or at least turn them into centres of post-Modernist spectacle instead of sites for the production of surplus value) and make it possible to return to living in small self-sufficient rural communities. Even if we leave aside the anti-woman and anti-worker implications of a development which is predicated on the casualisation of employment and the return of women to the home, it is still necessary to expose this idea for the nonsense it is.

It is a nonsense because people do not and cannot live by information alone. You can now easily send digitised information into any corner of the globe, or indeed into space, cheaply, easily and virtually instantaneously, but you cannot eat it, you cannot wear it, you cannot sit on it or make love to it. Information alone will not keep you warm or keep the rain off, it will not bring down a fever, wash the dishes or wipe a baby's bottom. To imagine that all economic activity can be reduced to the processing of information is little short of lunacy. Many people, of course, can work from home in this way, and some might even want to; but working is not the only thing they do. They will still need to buy, or have delivered to them, food and other goods; they may well have partners, parents or children who need to travel to work or school, they will need to visit (or be visited by) doctors, dentists, hairdressers, plumbers, repair technicians and other specialists; they will probably want to see their friends. If they live in remote rural communities instead of cities, all this will involve more travel, not less. It will also be much more likely to take the form of energy-guzzling individual trips in a private car, rather than the less wasteful mass transit of cities.

The 'two spheres' myth

Contemplating the enormous destructiveness and waste of capitalism's inexorable drive to the creation of endless new products, each with its in-built obsolescence, and attempting to find a more equitable division of labour, some thinkers, notably Ivan Illich and Andre Gorz, have proposed a future model of work sharply differentiated into two spheres. The first of these, the sphere of necessity, is characterised by highly automated, centrally-planned heteronomous activity, and is concerned purely with supplying the goods required to meet basic human needs. Work in this sphere is routinised and fragmented and alienating, but, because it is so highly automated and efficiently managed, it requires only a very small total number of person-hours, so, with everyone doing their share, it takes up only a minimal fraction of the working day, week or year. The other sphere is characterised by autonomous activity. Here, work is creative, individualistic and unalienated. The implication is that the goods and services produced in this way are luxuries, rather than necessities, but neither Illich nor Gorz advocates the socialisation of any of the activities currently carried out unpaid by women as housework (and typically taking up considerably more time per week than the 40-odd hours of most paid full-time employment). Despite some pious nods in the direction of men doing a larger share of this domestic labour (but no indication of what mechanism will be used to oblige them to do so), the implication is that domestic labour will remain as exploitative, repetitive and resource-intensive (because of the lack of economies of scale) as it is at present.

The fact that this model, as proposed, is oppressive to women is not, of course, enough in itself to render it implausible. Neither is the fact that neither Gorz nor Illich, nor, to my knowledge, any of their followers, has proposed a feasible route from our present situation to their two-sphere utopia. What places this model as firmly in the myth category as that of the electronic cottage or the all-robot working class is its assumption that human needs are absolute and unchanging. The most cursory study of anthropological literature, should indicate that most of the things regarded as 'needs' in any given society are highly culturally and historically specific. One culture's needs are another's luxuries. An Australian aboriginal needs to be able to travel freely along ancestral routes without encountering fences as much as a frightened old lady on an inner city housing estate needs a panic alarm. To each, the other's need is an unnecessary luxury.

The recent history of Eastern Europe is surely enough to show how badly wrong things can go when attempts are made to fix and institutionalise the definition of needs without mechanisms for responding to consumer demands.

I have already discussed the dynamics of the capitalist process of commodification, whereby the introduction of new commodities creates a demand for new services which in turn become the basis for new commodities and so on. Parts of this process can no doubt be dismissed as genuinely wasteful and unnecessary, and evidence of the cancerous nature of a system which manufactures artificial demands in order to profit by meeting them. However there is a sense in which some of these demands can be said to be genuine needs. In many cases, once one step has taken place, life becomes impossible without the next. Once you've put people to live in a glass-walled high-rise block with nowhere to keep food cool, it really is necessary for them to have a fridge, though this might be a luxury in a stone-walled cottage with a deep dark cellar. Once you've introduced the motor-cycle, you need the crash helmet.

Any attempt to establish a universal definition of 'needs' is likely - consciously or unconsciously - simply to institutionalise the value-system of whichever dominant group has control of the decision-making process at the time. In the process, not only will the things valued by the subordinated groups be rendered invisible, but their very oppression will also become institutionalised.

The definition of human need is perhaps the most difficult political task there is. It is too simple to say that one should just ask people what they want. The experience of oppression is overwhelming. When asked what they need, few people can get past the negative demands that oppression should cease. Indeed, some may have so successfully internalised the ideology of their oppressors that they may believe that continued oppression is what they need (thus, slaves 'need' the protection of their masters; women 'need' to be sexually dominated and so on). At best, the poor will say they need money; the hungry, food; the over-worked, rest. How can an illiterate imagine the need to read poetry? Or a slum-dweller who has never left the city the need to walk on a quiet mountainside? Or your great-grandfather the need to play an electric guitar?

A truly democratic definition of need, based on the liberation of human desire, is not conceivable in the world as it is today, with its extremes of hunger and glut, poverty and affluence, masculine leisure and feminine toil. Perhaps it is an impossible goal. That, however, is no excuse for freezing the grotesque values of the 1990s into a permanent structure of oppression.

* * *

I realise that I have given no answers here. Perhaps, however, in the negative process of rubbishing other people's answers, I may have lighted on some of the necessary ingredients of a new red-green synthesis. I leave it to you to decide.

copyright © Ursula Huws, 1991