Anarchism and climate debate - Ewa Jasiewicz and George Monbiot

Time for a revolution

There can be no state solutions to climate change: governments won't give up the powers that lead to environmental ruin

by Ewa Jasiewicz

Thursday August 21 2008 08:00 BST

There was a joke going round the Climate Camp in the last days. As well as the "wellbeing tent", which dealt with mildly traumatised activists on the receiving end of 5am police batons, someone proposed a "wellmeaning" tent. It would accommodate those who'd like to include state and capitalism-based solutions in the movement to reverse climate change. The camp's outer fence would curve into the wellmeaning tent to create a round-table for stakeholders including the police (successfully kept out of the site after days of stand-offs), E.ON UK and other energy industry representatives ? tea and hand-wringing optional.

The joke was prompted by a controversial presentation by George Monbiot, in which he endorsed the use of the state as a partner in resolving the climate crisis. Monbiot held the audience rapt as he explained the fundamental incompatibility of economic growth with the emission cuts needed to avert catastrophic climate change. Yet he confessed not knowing where to turn next to solve the issues of how to generate the changes necessary to shift our sources of energy, production and consumption, and where the state and capitalism fit in. He ended by endorsing the use of the state: "By God, let's use it". Amid the applause, some were appalled. Let me explain why.

Many of the organisers of the climate camps honed their skills in the anti-roads movement of the mid-1990s. Some came from the traveller, squatter and free party communities, an alliance of resistance built up to counter the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which criminalised travellers and activists reclaiming land and buildings for social, cooperative use. These activists came from a culture of anti-authoritarian anti-capitalism ? rejecting the property ladder and the commodification of living space, and embracing collective enjoyment, dance and music.

The continuum of this culture of resistance, of a struggle for a commons, for control over one's own and one's family's life, for non-alienated labour and social interaction, stretches back to the Diggers, Levellers and the Luddites ? English radicals struggling against the monarchy, taxes, land enclosure and austerity measures designed to empower a new

industrial class, funded by a feudal and colonial land-grab and slavery.

This historical memory, and these beliefs in a global commons, in leaderless, participative organising and grassroots anti-state and anti-capitalist action run deep through the camps. They're also informed by a culture of direct action and a refusal to accept top-down solutions and a system of parliamentary democracy that reduces participation in politics to 16 "X"s in a box in an average lifetime.

But did Scargill and Monbiot really "get" the camp and its cultures of resistance? The latest edition of the NUM's newsletter criticised the camp for being too middle-class, anti-miner, and alienated from "real", genuine working class "realities". Are these representations fair? Many participants in the camp could be defined as the "precariat" ? neoliberalism's answer to the proletariat. No longer an urbanised worker in a regular job in for a majority of their working life, the precariat lives and works in a precarious state, at the mercy of a deregulated labour market. Work is dominated by casualisation, flexible and migrant labour, zero-hour contracts, temping, seasonal work, home working, self-employment and unemployment. Many at the camp form a part of this working class, no more in the control of the means of production than energy industry workers here or China or Poland.

State solutions to the climate crisis were presented to us 10 years ago through the Kyoto protocol ? what were they? To privatise the air we breathe and turn carbon emissions into commodities, to buy and sell atmospheric poison, to create a new market of trading in the means of ecological destruction. It's no wonder many at the camp reject state solutions to climate change.

Entertaining as the two-minutes-in-a-room-full-of-poison standoff between Monbiot and Scargill is, this gesture politics isn't getting to the heart of the fight. The question is, who and under what conditions, controls decision-making, and has climate-changing power? Who will pay the price of exile from family and common land, water and food insecurity, as land and rivers become polluted or diverted into the energy industry's use, for bauxite, uranium, coal, and iron-ore to build new infrastructure, power nuclear energy, expand the global coal market and concomitant infrastructure to perpetuate the whole process?

How do we bring about a transformation which empowers us all? Grassroots organising in cooperative, low-impact, sustainable ways, glimpsed at the Climate Camp, and practised daily by millions, is one way towards this. Another is to live at the sharpest end of climate chaos today.

So how about this for a challenge, George and Arthur? Spend two months, not two minutes, (together!) living in Matlu Camp in Jharsuguda, in Orissa province, India. One of the poorest states on earth, here in the heart of India's coal belt, are families displaced by mining, living in a polluted form of captivity. Where our very own Department for International Development has been restructuring governance, reinforcing the mining industries, and guiding land reforms allowing for the felling of pristine forest, more tribal resettlement and more environmental destruction.

Changing our sources of energy without changing our sources of economic and political power will not make a difference. Neither coal nor nuclear are the "solution", we need a revolution.

***

Identity Politics in Climate Change Hell

Posted August 22, 2008

Do you want to save the biosphere or boost your own brand of politics? You can?t do both.

By George Monbiot. Published on Comment is Free, 22nd August 2008

If you want a glimpse of how the movement against climate change could crumble faster than a summer snowflake, read Ewa Jasiewicz?s article, published yesterday on the Guardian?s Comment is Free site(1). It is a fine example of the identity politics that plagued direct action movements during the 1990s, and from which the new generation of activists has so far been mercifully free.

Ewa rightly celebrates the leaderless, autonomous model of organising that has made this movement so effective. The two climate camps I have attended ? this year and last ? were among the most inspiring events I?ve ever witnessed. I am awed by the people who organised them, who managed to create, under extraordinary pressure, safe, functioning, delightful spaces in which we could debate the issues and plan the actions which thrust Heathrow and Kingsnorth into the public eye. Climate camp is a tribute to the anarchist politics that Jasiewicz supports.

But in seeking to extrapolate from this experience to a wider social plan, she makes two grave errors. The first is to confuse ends and means. She claims to want to stop global warming, but she makes that task 100 times harder by rejecting all state and corporate solutions. It seems to me that what she really wants to do is to create an anarchist utopia, and use climate change as an excuse to engineer it.

Stopping runaway climate change must take precedence over every other aim. Everyone in this movement knows that there is very little time: the window of opportunity in which we can prevent two degrees of warming is closing fast. We have to use all the resources we can lay hands on, and these must include both governments and corporations. Or

perhaps she intends to build the installations required to turn the energy economy around - wind farms, wave machines, solar thermal plants in the Sahara, new grid connections and public transport systems - herself?

Her article is a terryifying example of the ability some people have to put politics first and facts second when confronting the greatest challenge humanity now faces. The facts are as follows. Runaway climate change is bearing down on us fast. We require a massive political and economic response to prevent it. Governments and corporations, whether we like it or not, currently control both money and power. Unless we manage to mobilise them, we stand a snowball?s chance in climate hell of stopping the collapse of the biosphere. Jasiewicz would ignore all these inconvenient truths because they conflict with her politics.

?Changing our sources of energy without changing our sources of economic and political power?, she asserts, ?will not make a difference. Neither coal nor nuclear are the ?solution?, we need a revolution.? So before we are allowed to begin cutting greenhouse gas emissions, we must first overthrow all political structures and replace them with autonomous communities of happy campers. All this must take place within a couple of months, as there is so little time in which we could prevent two degrees of warming. This is magical thinking of the most desperate kind. If I were an executive of E.On or Exxon, I would be delighted by this political posturing, as it provides a marvellous distraction from our real aims.

To support her argument, Jasiewicz misrepresents what I said at climate camp. She claims that I ?confessed not knowing where to turn next to solve the issues of how to generate the changes necessary to shift our sources of energy, production and consumption?. I confessed nothing of the kind. In my book Heat I spell out what is required to bring about a 90% cut in emissions by 2030. Instead I confessed that I don?t know how to solve the problem of capitalism without resorting to totalitarianism.

The issue is that capitalism involves lending money at interest. If you lend at 5%, then one of two things must happen. Either the money supply must increase by 5% or the velocity of circulation must increase by 5%. In either case, if this growth is not met by a concomitant increase in the supply of goods and services, it becomes inflationary and the system collapses. But a perpetual increase in the supply of goods and services will eventually destroy the biosphere. So how do we stall this process? Even when usurers were put to death and condemned to perpetual damnation, the practice couldn?t be stamped out. Only the communist states managed it, through the extreme use of the state control Ewa professes to hate. I don?t yet have an answer to this conundrum. Does she?

Yes, let us fight both corporate power and the undemocratic tendencies of the state. Yes, let us try to crack the problem of capitalism and then fight for a different system. But let us not confuse this task with the immediate need to stop two degrees of warming, or allow it to interfere with the carbon cuts that have to begin now.

Ewa?s second grave error is to imagine that society could be turned into a giant climate camp. Anarchism is a great means of organising a self-elected community of like-minded people. It is a disastrous means of organising a planet. Most anarchists envisage their system as the means by which the oppressed can free themselves from persecution. But if everyone is to be free from the coercive power of the state, this must apply to the oppressors as well as the oppressed. The richest and most powerful communities on earth - be they geographical communities or communities of interest - will be as unrestrained by external forces as the poorest and weakest. As a friend of mine put it, ?when the anarchist utopia

arrives, the first thing that will happen is that every Daily Mail reader in the country will pick up a gun and go and kill the nearest hippy.?

This is why, though both sides furiously deny it, the outcome of both market fundamentalism and anarchism, if applied universally, is identical. The anarchists associate with the oppressed, the market fundamentalists with the oppressors. But by eliminating the state, both remove such restraints as prevent the strong from crushing the weak. Ours is not a choice between government and no government. It is a choice between government and the mafia.

Over the past year I have been working with groups of climate protesters who have changed my view of what could be achieved. Most of them are under 30, and they bring to this issue a clear-headedness and pragmatism that I have never encountered in direct action movements before. They are prepared to take extraordinary risks to try to defend the biosphere from the corporations, governments and social trends which threaten to make it uninhabitable. They do so for one reason only: that they love the world and fear for its future. It would be a tragedy if, through the efforts of people like Ewa, they were to be diverted from this urgent task into the identity politics that have wrecked so many movements.

www.monbiot.com

References:

1. Ewa Jasiewicz, 21st August 2008. Time for a revolution. Comment is Free.
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/21/climatechange.kingsnorthclimatecamp