



Biofuels and the Rise of Nationalistic Environmentalism

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of biofuel production worldwide has paralleled a dramatic rise in food prices. The expansion of biofuels has been supported by a wide spectrum of people, from environmentalists looking for "sustainable" energy to conservatives wanting to reduce U.S. dependency on foreign oil. With food riots spreading, the U.S. remains committed to an expansion of biofuel.

Biofuels are part of a larger movement toward green capitalism, the idea that we can scale down our energy use through technologies that improve the efficiency of the consumer society. Biofuels are emblematic of the dark side of green capitalism, which is focused almost entirely on the well being of the global upper class. Biofuels are a form of nationalistic environmentalism that is creating a foundation on which more extreme nationalists will try to wed the racist tools of yesterday with a version of "sustainability" that will include the destruction of the global poor.

Real solutions are both impossibly difficult and simple. The cooperative societies in which most humans have always lived are capable of supporting a high standard of living with far less resources than the individualized, consumer society. Enlightened political leadership would be helpful, but we can create a sustainable society without it. Indeed, we have to.

The current food crisis was terribly predictable, and has been anticipated for several years now. Starting about seven years ago, the world started using more food than it was producing, steadily eating into stored supplies. As grain stores have shrunk year by year, the biofuel movement has taken off like a virus. Rapid biofuel expansion has been propelled by a concern over American dependence on imported oil, as well as concerns about "sustainable" energy supplies and carbon emissions.

Meanwhile, environmentalists concerned about our future food supply were sounding the alarm, and being ignored. For some, it was terribly obvious that a disaster was brewing. While there has been considerable debate about the energy returns from various biofuels, no one debates the basic math. It takes about 10 acres to feed a car on ethanol for a year.^[1] The world supply of

grainland is about three-tenths of an acre per person, and is expected to shrink to less than a quarter acre by 2020. [2] Clearly, direct market competition between rich and poor for land to feed cars or people could be disastrous. Given the relentless fall in holdover stocks – grain in storage – over the last few years, price spikes were inevitable.

Although other factors have driven food prices up, biofuel expansion is the tipping factor, the real driver of price hikes of the scale we are seeing. Other factors, such as drought and increased meat consumption, would have caused an incremental increase in prices. Markets respond smoothly as long as there is an adequate buffer between supply and demand. When that buffer gets too tight, then the markets start oscillating much more severely. To go from almost no biofuel to 5% of the world's food going into biofuel in a few years can have only one impact on the market. Biofuel is not the only factor influencing food prices, but it is the decisive factor between moderate market escalation and dangerous oscillation.

As an environmental activist, I was wary when my friends started enthusiastically grabbing used cooking oil from behind restaurants. I did not think they were aware of the political Frankenstein they were creating. American consumers are both enormously powerful and very disconnected from the natural world or any consideration of the limits of the Earth on which we all reside. Now that a movement has been created to expand biofuel production rapidly, with support from everyone from President Bush to a large fraction of the environmental movement, it will be difficult to stop.

The growth of the biofuel craze has been very rapid. For those that would argue that biofuel does not compete with food supplies, the actual behavior of the market, even at this early stage, belies such contentions. Radical increases in food prices caused in large part by biofuel expansion have triggered food riots in Haiti, Guinea, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Mexico. (That list is likely to be longer by the time you read this.) Even in Italy consumers have caused public disturbances over the rising price of food. Biodiesel plants built in Malaysia now lie idle, never having been put into production, because those odd Malaysian peasants are demanding the right to *eat* their palm oil. Meanwhile, in Swaziland, a small impoverished nation in South Africa where forty percent of its people are facing food shortages, the government decided last year to start exporting biofuel. [3] The World Bank has stated that 33 countries may be at risk from destabilization because of skyrocketing food prices. [4]

When I first started writing about this issue several years ago, global grain stocks were at their lowest point in over 30 years. Grain stocks have continued to fall. We are perched on a precipice where a drought or other disruption of production in grain-producing regions could cause severe instability in both food and energy prices. Such instability could trigger widespread famine. Such concerns are not restricted to fringe critics. Goldman Sachs is predicting that *"vulnerable regions of the world face the risk of famine over the next three years as rising energy costs spill over into a food crunch..."* [5] The number of people in the world suffering severe undernourishment was declining until the late 1990s. Now it is rising.

Currently, 5% of the global food supply is going into biofuels, and that fraction is growing very rapidly – some would say virally. [6] If the current rate of expansion of biofuel continues, ethanol plants will be using almost all of the U.S. corn crop within 5-7 years. In response to this growth rate and the dangerous potential outcomes it implies, the United Nations Rapporteur on Food has called for a moratorium on biofuels expansion. The European Union is drafting legislation so that they will only import biofuels that are produced "sustainably," but the definition of that term is still up for debate.

The carbon-saving aspect of biofuels has turned out to be an illusion as well. Millions of acres of

forest, including enormous areas of tropical rainforests in Malaysia and Brazil, are being destroyed to produce biofuels. On average, biofuels add *more* carbon to the atmosphere than fossil fuels. [7]

And how is the U.S. responding? In the fall of 2004, Congress passed a tax relief bill supporting biodiesel, and the new energy bill passed by Congress in 2007 supports a rapid expansion of ethanol production.[8] President Bush has spoken openly in favor of biofuel, and has visited biofuel plants to show his support.[9] Liberal campaigner, musician and activist Willie Nelson has been advocating the use of biofuel. Conservative governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has been promoting biofuel Hummers in California. At the 2007 North American International Auto Show in Detroit, General Motors released their new ethanol Hummer. Virgin Atlantic, one of the world's major airlines, announced in January 2008 that it is going to conduct the first commercial flight using biofuels on board a Boeing 747 (one of the world's largest airliners). [10]

It is no surprise that conservatives are in favor of biofuel, given their traditional nationalistic focus. The number of liberally minded, educated environmentalists who favor biofuels expansion is more surprising. I have had many arguments trying to decipher how so many smart people could fail to see the obvious connections. Cars are very hungry, consuming the grain that would feed 25-30 people. The global market is highly integrated, one big pond where commodities move fluidly and markets ratchet upwards any time the supply tightens relative to demand. Are these facts not painfully obvious?

They are, and the solution to the question of why so many people would be so foolish is sobering. American environmentalism has become increasingly nationalistic. If one takes a step back from biofuels and looks at the broader environmental movement, the dominant trends are towards "green capitalism," or "Natural Capitalism," to use the title of a book by Paul Hawken and Amory Lovins. According to this theory, the new green technologies are going to create "green" jobs, and the economy will continue to prosper as workers construct windmills and insulate sophisticated energy-sipping homes and offices. Consumers will buy compact fluorescent bulbs and efficient cars, and we will steadily reduce our energy use. This "green capitalism" is by far the dominant trend in environmentalism today, with luminary conservatives like George Shultz being among its more prominent advocates.

It sounds great. But there is a side to this movement, of which biofuel is emblematic, which is far darker than any of its current advocates dare recognize. Everyone, save a few wingnuts, acknowledges that oil is a finite resource. A few years ago, some oil geologists started suggesting that the peak of global oil production might be very soon, now or in the next few years, rather than decades away, as had been assumed. At first they were ridiculed. But global oil production has remained nearly flat for several years, demand pressures have continued to increase, and prices have spiked.

It now seems very likely that we are at or near a peak in global oil production. The global industrial economy is facing limits and depletions of many other resources as well, prompting the prominent peak oil theorist Richard Heinberg to title his most recent book *Peak Everything*. (The idea that industrialism could face multiple limits of resource availability has been around since at least the 1972 publication of *The Limits to Growth*. Though that book sold millions of copies, enormous efforts were subsequently expended in suppressing the distressing conclusions reached therein. That in itself is an instructive story.[11])

Some of the advocates of green capitalism – of which there are many at this point – are aware of the likely pending limits of oil and other resources. They paint a scenario of continued growth and prosperity even as we downscale our energy use and pollution, using more efficient technologies

and design. Some are more optimistic than others about exactly how much oil we might have left, and how resource limitations might impact future economic growth. The green capitalist model, as espoused by a number of its most prominent adherents, suggests that we can feed 9 to 12 billion people in the coming decades even with falling oil supplies and significant biofuel development by applying green technologies.^[12] So why are we facing a "risk of famine," to use Goldman Sachs' words, over forty years earlier and with 3 to 6 billion fewer people?

Because numbers on paper do not equal reality on the ground, and because nationalistic environmentalism focuses almost entirely on the well-being of the global upper class. It is probably true that it is possible for a limited number of people to transition to a highly efficient, consumer society, but only if a couple billion of our fellow humans suffer deprivation, or perhaps even outright destruction, to make way.

The industrial economy is intimately, terribly dependent on oil. So much so that we can hardly conceive how much of it we use. Richard Heinberg maintains that a single teaspoon of oil contains as much energy as eight hours of human labor. In practical application, that is probably a slight exaggeration. Nonetheless, we have gotten accustomed to using extraordinary energy. We have god-like powers at our fingertips when we turn the key to drive down to the corner store for a pack of chewing gum.

Under conditions of expansion, the market economy appears benign, even progressive. It is no coincidence that the peak of democratic development in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations occurred at the peak of the colonial development and prosperity. As the traders gained power in these societies, the market expanded, and it was economically important for civil liberty to expand as well. So, too, in modern times. The expansion of democracy and civil liberty has followed on the heels of the expansion of colonialism and the growth of markets. There is not a simple linear relationship between the economy and democracy, but over time there are powerful forces that make certain kinds of social change more likely at particular times. Ecology sets the stage for economy, and economy favors different social movements at different times.

Nearly all academic, political and religious leaders try to make their own ideas sound more important than the supply of oil, topsoil, or the health of the forest. The end result is that while there is a direct relationship between ecology and democracy, knowledge of that connection is suppressed by leftist and rightist alike as they strive to make their ideas and policies seem more important than nasty things like dirt and oil.

As a result of this odd historical conspiracy, we are suffering a terrible illusion. We imagine that we have constructed our democracy, expanded our civil liberty, and built an industrial economy in defiance of gravity, without regard for topsoil, clean water, or the parts of the world that we label as natural "resources." The truth is that fossil fuels have financed a breakneck expansion of industrial development and trade that has powerfully favored social movements that seek to expand our civil liberties. Just as the democracy of Greek and Roman civilizations collapsed when their colonialism became more embattled and their economies struggled, so will ours.

As much as we may sing the praises of the open, democratic society, that kind of society is very well suited to the position of the winner in the competition for growth and dominion. What is the relative strength of authoritarian governments? They command effectively and efficiently. They bring people together to undertake more aggressive foreign policy, be it military or economic warfare, that would otherwise divide a more civil society. We may demonize particular individuals in the current American leadership that seek to stuff our civil liberties into the closet with the Patriot Act and other related legislation even while they engage in ever escalating oil warfare, but the underlying transition is not about personal evil. *There is no way the United States and the*

global consumer class can maintain its dominion without powerful military pressure, and that martial stance will favor authoritarian political development. Biofuel is environmental nationalism, and it is the cutting edge of this process.

As radical as it may sound to suggest that democracy as we know it will soon fall at the feet of a nationalistic environmentalism, a movement that may include the destruction of the global poor among its methods of achieving "sustainability," it seems fairly obvious if one simply examines current trends. The facts are plain, if we choose to see them:

- 1) Oil is a finite resource. We are very likely near or at peak production.
- 2) The Earth itself is finite. Economic growth as we currently define it cannot continue forever.
- 3) Ecological limits have impacts on our economy, and our economy has powerful impacts on our politics.
- 4) The constricting of global economic growth will not favor a continued expansion of democracy and civil liberty, and will likely favor the growth of more powerful centralized authority among the dominant powers.
- 5) The wealthy and powerful classes of the world are going to try to maintain their position of privilege in consumer societies into the future. The attempt to do so while the energy pie was expanding appeared benign. As the energy pie shrinks, the only way the consumer society can continue to grow, regardless of the development of more efficient technologies, is by taking an ever greater fraction of a shrinking supply of energy and other resources. If the pie is getting smaller, we can continue to eat gluttonously only if we take a larger share of what's left.
- 6) The consumer society will be sustained only at the cost of a very aggressive foreign policy on the part of the industrial powers. The people whose resources we are taking will fight back, albeit haltingly and uncertainly. The resulting tensions will favor authoritarian rule in the poorer nations as well.

As a result of the aforementioned, conservatives will embrace nationalistic environmentalism, and will do so in the coming years with a greater fervor than liberals ever could have imagined. We will see the rise of a passionate, chest-thumping environmentalism, built on the foundation of green capitalism, that dwarfs the current movement.

The nationalism of the future will not be like the nationalism of the past. Superficially, it may look the same. Past fascistic movements were often highly populists, espousing the highest ideals and employing glorious symbolism of a brighter future. Similarly, the modern nationalistic environmentalists will not paint bloody pictures of death and destruction. Rather, we will, as in Swaziland, be bringing development at last to the poor, even as we drive them off of their land and replace their "inefficient" farming methods with modern "sustainable" biofuel production. On April 29, 2008, President Bush made a speech in which he ardently declared that biofuel expansion is not related to the rise in food prices, regardless of all the evidence to the contrary.^[13] This is the new face of environmental nationalism. It is endorsed by a broad spectrum of the body politic. It denies the plainly obvious, hides behind the moral neutrality of the market, and is likely sowing the seeds of authoritarian rule and global-scale mass starvation of the poor.

Nationalistic environmentalism will differ from past nationalisms by covertly benefiting the elite across national boundaries. The power of the market economy is not ultimately efficiency, it is

rather the hiding of the oppressor. If one race takes land and energy from another, then there is a target against which the poor can focus their organizing energy. But who is to blame for hunger in a global market economy? That is the real power of the market. It utterly defeats revolutionary impulses before they can bloom. The global economy has become a maze of non-racial, non-national, nominally non-class-based commerce with no one in particular to blame for any evil that should befall any particular individual or group.

In this case, "nationalism" as we have known it in the past becomes something of a misnomer. The global elite, however loosely defined, have more in common with each other than with their fellow national citizens. Civil liberty has always been largely defined by class. We developed a very black-and-white mythology of fascism as we exited World War II that does not well define our future.

As the elite of the ancient empires had no shortage of civil liberty, neither will the elite of any of the modern authoritarian movements. Powerful institutions adapt, and the global corporate economy is not going to lie down and die. Rather, we will see the distress creeping up from the bottom, as it is now. Those at the top will more aggressively label anyone who challenges their privilege, or their right to turn food into fuel via the sanctity of the market economy, as a "terrorist," a modern day "barbarian at the gate."

At what point one chooses to use such loaded words as fascism, authoritarianism, imperialism or the like will depend largely on where one finds oneself in the grand hierarchy of the market. The noteworthy point here and now is that western liberalism, however much it may once have held pan-human ideals, is quickly being drawn into the conceptual framework of environmental nationalism. This in turn will leave liberalism absolutely toothless to oppose more aggressive nationalists in the future. Are any current prominent democrats opposed to biofuel? What does that tell us about the future?

There is already an unholy alliance brewing between some radical ecologists, anti-immigration organizations, and those who see limiting population as a very high priority. (I put myself in this latter category.) The history of fascistic movements scapegoating minorities and immigrants need not be elaborated upon. As we face ever increasing oil prices, it is highly likely that the far right will wed the tools of old (racist scapegoating) with a version of "ecology" that seeks to "Save the Earth" at the expense of the global poor. We see the lace of this wedding being spun in the global warming debate, in which the right is already trying to hold the global poor accountable for climate change. Biofuel is more urgent, a much sharper sword cutting down the hungry of the world in the name of green capitalism even as you read these words.

The current environmental movement is taking the easy road, telling people what they want to hear. They are telling the public that we can continue the current consumer society if only we do it with more efficient cars, "sustainable" biofuels, and compact fluorescent light bulbs. By taking the easy road today, we may gain a few points of efficiency of energy use. But because we are failing to speak the truth, we are delivering the future to a potentially murderous ecofascist movement. Were it not for the current state of the biofuels movement, that would sound absurd. Given that many of the global poor are facing famine in 2008, when oil is still quite plentiful, is it not clear the foundation we are building? The truth is that we have a choice between a substantial change in our lifestyle or a global war between rich and poor of monumental scale. Anyone who believes we can fight such a war in a nice, civil, democratic society knows little about history.

It is humiliating, it is offensive, and we do not want to see it: we do not want to admit that our democratic consumer society is not the glorious invention of great minds impervious to the pressures of history. We have no more conscious awareness of the greater processes of cultural

change than did the members of past civilizations. This is the real problem that we face. Simply repairing the problem of ecological sustainability, from a technological standpoint, has been solved many times over.

It would be simple indeed to feed and house our citizens with a tenth of the resources that we are currently using in the wealthy nations, if that were our goal. That is more than literary grandstanding. I have built houses heated and powered with sunshine. I have studied the results, seen the failures and successes. Nationalistic environmentalism says we can create a solar suburbia, the green consumer society. That will come only at the price of murder on a global scale to finance our consumption.

The reality is that if we undertake to choose how we live, to purposefully change the structure of our society so that we are not living alone in large houses, not commuting to work, then the technological side of sustainability is very simple indeed. I have built houses that use 90% less energy per inhabitant than the American average, and done so at very low expense. But they are not suburban tract homes. Far from it. They are urban and rural cooperatives. Cooperatively based societies, the kind in which most of humanity has always lived, can achieve high standards of living with a tenth of the resources that Americans currently use without any new technologies. If we are talking about global solutions, is it even possible to apply expensive alternative energy systems on an individual or single-family basis on a global scale? The answer, very clearly, is no. Social design – how and where we choose to live – and cooperative use are far more important than the new technological gadgets

The truth is that fossil fuel machines are well suited, from an economic perspective, to individual use. They are cheap up front, though their long-term running costs are high. Machines used by individuals are not used intensively, so the cheap up-front cost dominates consumers' concern. But for machines that are used more intensively, as when they are used cooperatively, the higher up-front costs of efficiency and alternative energy are more than offset by the savings resulting from intensity of use. What if each city block had a community laundry instead of every individual or small American family living in a large house with their own washer and dryer? You would not need to persuade people to do the right thing. The people who ran the community laundry would take the obvious path. They would install solar water heaters, and possibly other energy-saving technologies, because it was economically rewarding to do so. Regardless of law or ideology, simple economics would favor efficiency and alternative energy.

Solar water heating in a community laundry does not relate to biofuels directly, but the same logic applies. The real solution to the liquid fuel issue is not efficient cars or biofuel. It's design. The real solution is to live close enough to where you work and play so you do not have to drive. That kind of logic on a global scale will work. Biofuels will not, not without mass market murder as its companion.

The problem is that no one has an answer to the end of growth. The expansion of civil liberty has been built on economic growth. Every movement from Aryan Nationalist to Marxist has built movements based on telling their constituents they can face an ever-brighter future of industrial wealth. And now nationalistic environmentalism is assuming that growth is unstoppable and making deals with the devil.

The problem with nationalistic environmentalism, even beyond its potential for some very ugly political outcomes, is that it will not work even from an ecological perspective. Long after the current wave of industrial growth has come to an end, whatever the fallout may be, there will still be humans living on the Earth. Those humans will still face the problem of organizing themselves in a manner that does not serve to suppress social awareness. Biofuels and other “sustainable”

technologies seek only to put a thin layer of green paint over a consumer society that is by the day growing more economically polarized. That polarized society will never be sustainable. A polarized society actively seeks to repress the social awareness of its citizens, to engage in endless witch hunts against communists, drug dealers, and terrorists of all sorts. It is a blind social system that cannot wisely adapt to the future.

The ecological problems we are facing seem so enormous that we feel compelled to look for shortcuts. Every thread of our political fabric is woven from expectations of growth. The end of growth is so inconceivable that we can't imagine a response to it. The truth is that the answers are both nearly impossible and terribly easy.

The first solution is simply truth-telling. When those educated about the issues consistently hide the truth and tell the public what it wants to hear, we enter a never-never land where compromises get compromised and mass-marketed ecological niceties become the building blocks of ecofascism and biofueled mass murder. The truth is that our lifestyle is going to change, whether we like it or not. The only choice we get to make is whether we lead the curve or are led by it, whether we create history or are forced by history into circumstances we haven't chosen.

The changes we need to make are difficult because getting large groups of people to do anything is difficult, and industrial civilization as a whole is currently in a state of collective psychosis in regards to growth. Almost every word uttered on the evening news assumes continued growth for years and decades to come. It is no wonder that so many people have so little understanding of the scale of change we need to undertake. The very fabric of our cultural reality has become divorced from the basic fact that the world on which we live is finite.

The necessary changes are easy because they do not demand a mass movement at first. Movements always start at the fringes. Wise policy at the top would be helpful. But it is not likely, and we do not need it. The process of economic localization, of building a sustainable and democratic society from the ground up is already being undertaken in many corners of the world, among the least privileged of people.

It is a near certainty that the dominant powers in the U.S. and Europe will shift politically to the right in the coming years as the oil belt tightens. That is the only way these privileged nations will be able to maintain their privilege. The same is true for the eastern powers as well. The struggles of the next few decades will be top to bottom, not east to west.

Instead of lying about the outcomes of the green capitalist economy, instead of putting the food of the world into the gas tanks of American SUVs, instead of telling American consumers they can rest easy on organic cotton linens for decades to come, should we not speak the truth? We are going to have to downscale our consumption and our economy drastically, or face a global war over resources, with all the political fallout that will bring.

We as citizens can localize our economies, develop more cooperative means of living and using resources, and live more rewarding lives in greater connection to the people around us. We do not need the president or Congress to give us permission. Our children are going to live cooperatively in a hundred years whether we like it or not. The choices we make now will determine whether they do so under conditions of peace and freedom, or under an ecofascist boot inciting unending war. The current trend of nationalistic environmentalism, with biofuel as its cutting edge, is leading us very much in the wrong direction.

An earlier version of this article appeared at [Reality Sandwich](#).

NOTES

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